

A woman in a flowing purple dress is running through a lush green garden. Her right arm is raised, and her left leg is bent as if in mid-stride. To the right, there are large, ornate planters filled with red and pink flowers. The background is a soft-focus green lawn and foliage.

*Nothing is more
seductive than
temptation.*

Potent Pleasures

*"James weaves a web of
scandals and surprises,
forcing the reader into
a delicious surrender."*

—USA Today

Eloisa James

Potent Pleasures by: Eloise James

Chapter 1

Kent, England March 1798

Charlotte was one week short of seventeen when her life changed, falling into two halves like a

shiny child's ball: before and after.

In the time before, Charlotte was staying with Julia Brentorton, her dearest friend from school.

Julia and she survived boarding school together: the dreary grind of everyday Latin instruction,

music instruction, dance instruction, art class, etiquette with the school mistress, Lady

Sipperstein. Etiquette was really the only unpleasant class.

"Julia!" Lady Sipperstein would suddenly appear behind her left shoulder. "Cross your legs at the

ankle when you sit in a low sofa.

"Walk up the stairs again, Charlotte, and do not sway your hips this time! You are wiggling in an

inappropriate fashion."

Lady Sipperstein was a terrifying woman with a bosom that extended forward like the prow of a

ship. She knew to a hair how low one must bow to a duchess as opposed to a king, and she

drilled her students as if they would do so every day.

She was full of maxims: "One dismisses a servant as if he were a young child: with firmness,

brevity, and uninterest. . . . The appropriate gifts for the sick depend on where they live: If they

live on your estate, instruct the cook to make bone-marrow jelly and bring it yourself, with fruit;

if they live in the village, instruct the servants to deliver an uncooked chicken instead. And of

course be sure to ascertain that any illness is not contagious

before you enter a house: While it is

important to show feeling, one must not be foolish."

Etiquette was an hour of unnerving questions. "Julia! If a footman enters the breakfast room with

an obviously swollen jaw, what is the appropriate response?" "Send him home?" Julia would

suggest tentatively.

"No! Information first. Is the swelling the result of a distressed tooth or an improper brawl the

night before? If he has been brawling, dismiss him. If not? Julia?" "Ah, send him to a doctor?"

Julia stammered.

"Incorrect. Inform the butler that he should be put on duties that will keep him out of public

view. There is no point in coddling servants."

For Charlotte, art class was the focus of the day. She was happiest in the white square room

furnished only with twelve easels.

They painted the same groupings over and over: two oranges, one lemon; two peaches, one pear.

Charlotte didn't mind.

Julia did. "A pumpkin today!" she would chortle, mimicking Miss Frollip's excited tone when

she

introduced the latest still life.

For Julia, there was dance class - and that not because of dance, but because of Mr. Luskie. He

was a rather hairy man, a family man: robust, friendly, not a bit of danger with the girls, the

teachers all agreed. But Julia thought his whiskers were dashing, and she read messages in the

gender pressure of his hand as he directed her through the steps

of a cotillion. "I adore him," she

whispered to Charlotte at night.

Charlotte would wrinkle her nose: "I don't know, Julia, he's rather . . . well, he's not . . ." It was

hard to put into words. He was common. But how not to insult Julia? She thought a bit uneasily

of Julia's passionate vows of love: She wouldn't do anything, would she? Of course, Mr. Luskie

wouldn't . . . but Julia was so beautiful. She was like a peach, Charlotte thought: golden and

sweet-smelling and soft-looking. Would Mr. Luskie? One of Charlotte's governesses had been

stridently opinionated about men: "They want one thing, Lady Charlotte!" she would say.

"One thing, and don't you forget it and get yourself ruined, now!" Charlotte would nod,

wondering what the one thing was.

So she would whisper back, "I don't think he's so handsome, Julia. Did you see that he has red

veins in his cheeks?" "No!" said Julia. "He doesn't!" "Yes, he does," said Charlotte.

"How do you notice so much?" Julia said crossly.

Finally school drew to a close, and one by one the girls were taken off by titled relatives, or

simply by maids: taken off to be fitted and pinked and "tarted up," Julia said. It was time to start

a process that would end in settlements and dowries, balls and weddings.

As the daughter of a duke, Charlotte was regarded enviously. Her coming out would be

magnificent. Her elder sister Violetta had made her bow to society in a ballroom draped from top

to bottom with white lilies.

It was only Charlotte who didn't care much. She longed, if the truth be told, to stay in the white

square room and paint another apple, or (if the market was particularly exciting that week) even a

persimmon. She was good, really good, she knew she was, and Miss Frollip knew she was, but

that was the end of it.

She had to come out; Julia had to come out; there would be little time for persimmons.

So when her mother picked her up at Lady Chatter-ton's School for Young Gentlewomen,

Charlotte felt resigned, but not excited.

Her mother arrived in full armor, in Charlotte's private opinion: in the ducal coach with four

footmen behind. The duchess was shy and quailed at the thought of an interview with the

formidable Lady Sipperstein. Poor Mama, Charlotte thought. She must have been in a terrible

tizzy.

Finally Charlotte and her mother were regally dismissed by Lady Sipperstein and escaped in the

coach. The duchess grinned in a most unduchesslike fashion, leaned back against the satin

cushions, and said, "Thank goodness, you're finished, Charlotte! I never have to see Lady

Sipperstein again! We can be comfortable. How did the last picture go, darling - oranges, wasn't

it?" For Charlotte's mama was a devoted parent, who lovingly kept track of her children's latest

exploits, even if in Charlotte's case that had simply turned into a long progression of watercolor

fruits.

"All right, Mama," Charlotte said. "I'll show you when we get

home." Charlotte frowned a bit.

Her mama treated all her work the same: with reverence, delight, and a noncritical eye.

"Good," said Adelaide comfortably. "I shall send it off immediately to Saxony. We're doing quite

well on that hallway, dearest. Why, two or three more and the walls will be full!" Charlotte

grimaced. Her parents seemed to view her painting as a decorating tool, a kind of wallpaper.

Each new painting was sent out to the best framer (Messrs. Saxony, Framers to the Crown), fitted

into a gold frame with an appropriate matte chosen personally by Mr. Saxony, Sr., and solemnly

delivered back to the ducal mansion. Then it was hung up in a long, long row of fruit (and the

odd vegetable) that decorated a long, long hall in the east wing.

"Now, Charlotte," Adelaide said with resolution. "We must start planning for your come out

immediately. Why, I happen to know that Lady Riddleford - Isabella's mother - has already

taken the weekend of April nineteenth, which was precisely when I was planning your ball,

dearest. So we must choose a time immediately and make it known. I was thinking of the

weekend after. What do you think, darling?" Charlotte didn't answer. She was thinking of her

latest painting. But Adelaide was used to Charlotte's lapses into inattentiveness; she simply

returned to her plans.

When Charlotte visited what her brother, Horace, called the orchard (the long row of pictures in

the east wing) she could see change: hours of painting under Miss Frollip's tutelage had turned

her oranges from misshapen to round; apples stopped being poisonously red and gained some

reality.

What she was working on now was color. Color was so difficult: oranges, for example. When

she closed her eyes, she saw groups of oranges, bright against her eyelids. She mixed and mixed

for hours, a little yellow, blue, brown, but she couldn't find the orange she saw in her mind's eye.

Oranges, colored the right way, had a slight brownish tinge at the top and streaks of blue: colors

that smelled of the sun, of warm seas, of real orchards rather than of long halls or white rooms.

But Charlotte didn't have much time for painting after they arrived at the Calverstill House in

Albemarle Square. She endured hours and hours of poking and prodding from seamstresses, and

days of her mother's planning.

"Dearest," announced her mother. "Delphiniums!" Charlotte stared at her.

"Delphiniums what, Mama?" she finally asked.

"Delphiniums! They're your flower for the ball! I've been racking my mind . . . you know I did

Violetta's ball in lilies. I had to avoid colors for her because of her name, but delphiniums are

such a lovely blue. They will set off your hair perfectly."

Just now the rage was for blondes: blondes with curly locks and blue eyes, but Charlotte had

-black hair, her mama thought despairingly. She did have green eyes, but her skin was so

white - not a drop of color. True, with some coaxing her hair formed perfect ringlets, and her

skin was creamy, but she was no sweetly pert debutante. Her

eyebrows arched like question

marks over eyes as green as the ocean on a cloudy day. In fact, her whole face was pointed like a

question mark: Her chin formed a delicate triangle that simply led back to her eyes and those

flying eyebrows.

The duchess sighed a little. When Charlotte was happy, she was the most beautiful of her

daughters: She would simply have to see that she had a happy first ball, that's all.

Charlotte stood rock-still through all the fittings, closed her eyes, and analyzed the oranges that

appeared in her mind. Perhaps more red. Perhaps starting very red, and working back to orange,

in layers? "Charlotte!" her mother said. "Miss Stuart is trying to do up your hem. Please, turn

around when she asks you.

"Charlotte! I've asked you twice; please raise your arms.

"Charlotte!" Finally the fittings were over and the last pearls were painstakingly sewn into

Charlotte's presentation dress. Seventeen ball dresses fit for a duke's young daughter were

swaddled in tissue and hung in a wardrobe; the delphiniums were growing well, the duchess was

relieved to hear; ten footmen were summoned from the country; the ballroom was polished and

the chandeliers shined, and the watch notified of the extra traffic. The Calverstills were ready to

launch their last child onto society. Invitations winged their way to the London ton. And the

London ton accepted. The duchess may have been shy, but she was beloved, creative, and had

money to spare. A Calverstill ball would never be slighted.

Perhaps most important, young men accepted, all of them - fops, courtiers, gallants,

Corinthians - all the groups and cliques and sets of London. Charlotte was rumored to be

beautiful (her two elder sisters were) and she was sure to have an excellent dowry as her father

was plump in the pocket. And still two weeks remained before the ball.

So Charlotte was given permission to visit Julia in the country. Her mama didn't worry much.

"Charlotte, you mustn't be seen in public; this is a terribly delicate time," she said brightly,

looking at her dutiful but somehow detached daughter.

Could it be that Charlotte wasn't really interested in her presentation? No, no, the duchess

thought: Why, she loves talking about her dresses, and we had such a good time looking at all the

silks. Charlotte is so good with colors! And she had a positive surge of affection for her youngest

daughter, who had never caused her any real trouble or anxiety. Charlotte was reasonable, calm,

and unexcitable.

Charlotte was driven, in the ducal coach but with only one footman, a few hours out of London

to Squire Brentorton's estate. Julia greeted her with glowing eyes. She too had ball gowns to

show, with less embroidery and no pearls sewn in the hem, but beautiful all the same. And she

had a passion - of course.

"He's adorable, Charlotte! I adore him! He's not at all like that old Mr. Luskie. He's beautiful,

really beautiful; you'll love him - no red veins!" Charlotte wrinkled her nose at her.

"What do you mean, beautiful? And who are we talking about?"
She noticed with some dismay

that Julia's violet eyes were dreamy with love.

"His name is Christopher," Julia said. "He has curls ... he looks like Adonis, truly, Charlotte."

"But who is he?" Charlotte was getting suspicious. There was something evasive about the way

her friend's dewy gaze kept drifting off into the corners of the room. Julia pouted, just a little.

"Julia!" Charlotte said threateningly, smothering a grin. Her friend was so silly about men. Just a

few weeks ago she had cried heartbrokenly because she would never see Mr. Luskie again.

"He'll never hold me in his arms again," she'd wailed, "we'll never dance together again," sobbing

into her pillow. And even Charlotte was moved, and wondered if she'd been too harsh, constantly

pointing out the plumpness of Mr. Luskie's backside and the growing bald spot on his head.

Julia cast her eyes on the ground. "He's a man of God," she finally said, softly.

"What?" said Charlotte, not understanding her. "He's . . . well, he's a curate!" Julia said.

"A curate? Julia!" "He has blond curls, Charlotte. He looks like, well, he looks like a painting!"

Having confessed the worst, she ignored Charlotte's frown and listed the curate's many graces:

He was young, and more handsome than anyone including the seller of sweet lavender who

sometimes came by the school and who, until now, had been consecrated as the most handsome,

even if Mr. Luskie was the most cherished.

"Even you will like him, Charlotte. Because he's full of virtue, and quite thin - you know how

you

were always saving that poor Mr.

Luskie was a bit plump. And he would be a wonderful person to paint." Julia sat up, and looked

speculatively at Charlotte.

"You don't suppose . . . You can't keep painting fruit now we're out of school, Charlotte! Why

don't you offer to paint Christopher?" "You're demented," Charlotte said fondly. "I will not offer

to paint a young man I've never even met! Why, my mother would collapse in shock."

"Well, Charlotte, you do have to start thinking about men instead of paintings now, you know,"

Julia said a bit sharply. "You just never seem to show any interest!" The curate is more handsome

than the lavender seller, Charlotte thought on Sunday, her heart sinking a bit. Julia stared at him

so devotedly that Charlotte had to elbow her twice, so that she would bend her head to pray.

Charlotte watched him too, out of the corner of her eyes. He was somberly dressed in a black

cassock, blond curls smoothly shining. He didn't look like a painting; he looked like a statue - a

statue of a mischievous faun. There was something too smooth about his curls, and his face

looked naughty, she decided. Like her brother Horace's when he'd been sent down from Oxford.

On the way out of church Charlotte watched the curate wink at Julia and give her a very small,

very private smile while the cold spring sunlight shone on his hair. And when the squire and his

wife turned to greet two friends, she saw him slip Julia a bit of paper, and her knees went weak.

All the way home, chatting pleasantly with the unknowing Brentortons, Charlotte's mind was

racing. Julia was ruined! If anyone knew that a young man was writing to her, she'd never be able

to go to Almack's. She'd never be approved by the patronesses.

She would never find a husband.

When they got back to Brentorton Hall, Charlotte took Julia firmly under the elbow and swept

her upstairs to her room. Then she pushed the door shut, leaned on it, and stuck out her hand,

without saying a word.

Julia looked at her mutinously. Her eyes measured Charlotte's taller height against the oak door.

Julia was slight and small. She would never be able to push Charlotte's willowy self from the

door. She sighed and plumped down on her bed and pulled the small bit of paper from her bosom

with a practiced air that chilled Charlotte to the bone.

"It's nothing," she said. "Nothing, Charlotte!" She looked up at her fiercely. "See?" She flashed

the scrap of paper.

Charlotte snatched it. There were four words, written in peaky letters with blue ink: Stuart Hall,

Saturday, 9 o'clock.

"Oh, Lord, Julia, you wouldn't - you aren't meeting him, are you? Secretly?" Charlotte slid

slowly down, crushing her petticoats, until she was sitting against the door. "What is this place,

Stuart Hall?" "It's nothing bad." Julia leaned forward eagerly. "It's not a rendezvous - I would

never do anything like that.

It's a masquerade ball that is held every Saturday night, and I just happened to be talking to

Christopher about it."

"Christopher!" "Well, Reverend Colby, then, but I don't like his last name. Anyway, it is nothing

serious, Charlotte. It's a masquerade ball that lots of, well, merchants and servants attend, and

Christopher - Mr. Colby - says that people of our class never get to see real life, and especially

how everyone else lives. He says young girls, society misses, are like houseplants. We never do

anything, and then we're sold to the highest bidder, and he says that it is a perfectly amiable

dance, and everyone wears masks the whole time, so no one could see our faces and - " "Our!

Our faces!" repeated Charlotte.

Julia leaned forward. "You must come with me, Charlotte. You see, don't you? If you're with me

everything is quite proper. Mama knows how correct you are, and even if she found out, she

wouldn't be horrendously angry."

"Yes, she would," Charlotte replied, picturing Julia's brisk and forthright mother.

"Don't you see, Charlotte? We're just like sheep, being sold to the highest bidder, and - " "What

are you talking about, Julia?" Charlotte asked with exasperation. "What does being a sheep have

to do with sneaking off to go to a ball?" Julia wasn't sure she remembered. It all made so much

sense when Christopher explained it to her, his sweet face downcast as he talked of her sheeplike

docility.

"You know," she said vaguely. "We just have to get married, and we never get to see anything.

Oh, Charlotte," she said, abandoning the messy question of

ethics, "it will be fun, don't you see?

There's nothing improper about going to a party chaperoned by ... by a theologian!" A small

thread of rebellion lit in Charlotte. After all, had anyone asked her whether she wanted to come

out? Whether she wanted to get married? But of course she did want to get married, and the only

way to do it was to come out, so that train of thought didn't lead anywhere.

"I won't go if you don't," said Julia in a small voice. "We'll just look."

The corner of Charlotte's mouth quirked up in a grin and Julia answered her unspoken consent

with a squeal.

"You must promise me that you won't run off to dance with your curate and leave me alone,"

Charlotte said sternly.

"Oh, I wouldn't, Charlotte!" Julia's eyes were glowing. "We'll have to go up to the attic and find

something to wear. Costumes. I think there are some old dominoes up there."

Charlotte tried to remain calm but it was no use. Her reasonable, unexcitable temperament had

deserted her, leaving a racing pulse and a seductive taste of excitement.

Julia jumped up. "This is the perfect time to go to the attic. Mama and Papa always visit the

tenants on Sundays until time for luncheon."

So the girls crept up the stairs, all the way past the servants' floor into the huge, echoing attics

that lay under the timbers of Squire Brentorton's manor roof. Blocks of pale sunshine fell across

old pine boards, the dusty shapes of covered furniture, trunks of

outdated clothing. Charlotte

paused for a moment and watched dust specks eddy and dance in the light as Julia briskly trotted

across the floor toward the trunks. Within a minute she had found two voluminous black cloaks

that would cover their whole bodies.

At first it appeared that there were no masks, but then with a little shriek Julia pulled them from

the corner of another trunk.

"Hush, Julia!" Charlotte's heart raced.

"It's quite all right," Julia replied, looking up from where she was bundling the dominoes into a

clumsy parcel. "No one except one of the servants could possibly hear us."

"And what if one of the servants did hear a noise and came to investigate?" Charlotte demanded.

"Oh, Charlotte, you're such an innocent." Julia laughed. "We would bribe him, of course."

And, in fact, that very night Julia bribed her maid into airing out the dominoes and by the time

she returned them a week later, pressed and sweet-smelling, the excursion had come to seem

inevitable. Giggling wildly, Julia powdered Charlotte's hair with face powder so that it looked

vaguely like the old-fashioned hairstyles of twenty years ago.

Julia was delighted. "Look at me! I look just like that portrait of my mother upstairs on the

landing! And no one would recognize you, Charlotte," she said encouragingly. "With your mask

on, all I can see is powdered hair and a little bit of your face. Do you think we used too much

powder?" Charlotte looked at herself. Julia had certainly been liberal with the powder.

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about being asked to dance," Julia said, giggling. "A

gentleman would probably start sneezing if he got too close!" It should do, Charlotte thought

dubiously. They could go see how the other half of the world danced, and then come home.

Escaping the house was no problem. The east wing, where Julia's bedroom was, had stairs in the

back for servants, but the servants were in bed in the west wing when the girls stole out at nine

o'clock at night.

The curate was waiting around the curve of the drive as Charlotte and Julia rounded the bend.

Seeing a dark figure leaning against the carriage door, Charlotte's footsteps faltered. She felt a

wave of passionate conviction that this masquerade was a mistake. But Julia danced forward

irresistibly, shouting "Christopher" and generally acting as if surreptitious meetings on dark roads

were nothing new to her. Charlotte followed slowly, feeling that she really ought to tell the curate

that they had made a mistake and drag Julia home.

Yet to Charlotte's relief, Mr. Colby was respectful when the two girls reached the carriage. He

bowed solemnly when Julia introduced him to Charlotte, and mentioned that he had visited the

chapel at Calverstill while at Oxford. Somehow that comment managed to give the whole

excursion the air of a school outing. Charlotte felt immeasurably relieved, and at any rate Julia

bounded into the carriage before Charlotte had a chance to say anything about returning home.

She found herself seated on the dusty seats of a hired hack, sitting forward gingerly so as not to

crush the folds of her domino.

Then Mr. Colby pulled a bottle of champagne from a basket with such a flourish that it seemed

they must join him. Did people really drink on the way to balls? Charlotte sipped at her wine

uncertainly as the carriage gathered speed, lurching along the main road.

Julia babbled of dances and balls and servants.

Finally Charlotte pulled herself together. Mr. Colby must think she was dreadfully ill-bred,

sitting in total silence. She cleared her throat, a small uncertain noise, but Julia was deep in her

normal flow of distracted chatter and there was no space for Charlotte to speak. In fact, Julia

paused only to cast fascinated glances at the curate seated across from them, his head politely

bent toward Julia.

Finally Charlotte seized an opening and began asking the kind of question she had heard her

mother ask the curate: about his flock, so to speak, and how were the poorer people doing? "This

is a fortunate area," Mr. Colby replied courteously. "Miss Brentorton's father is more than

generous in his support of the parish."

"My mother says - " Julia broke in and dashed away with the new subject, and so Charlotte

relaxed even more and felt that while the excursion was daringly bold, it wasn't beyond reproach.

Someday she might even be able to tell her mother, and laugh about it with her.

Charlotte was able to keep her feeling of calm equanimity when they arrived at Stuart Hall. It was

an imposing brick building with long windows casting light

across gardens: not so different from

any gentleman's house, she thought. Inside, everyone was in costume, and most people had

masks, just as Mr. Colby had said. There were many, many people there, pushing slowly through

crowds in the hallway, and she could see, down the steps into the ballroom, couples lined up in

close rows on the floor.

They wormed their way into the ballroom, and found a little space over to one side, between a

statue of Narcissus and the open doors to the gardens. Mr. Colby pushed off and came back with

some rather vile lemonade, and they stood about sipping the drink.

"Do you know," Julia said, "I think there's some liquor in this lemonade."

"I shouldn't think so," was all Mr. Colby said. "They simply can't afford the best lemons here, the

way we can at home."

Charlotte and Julia both felt a flash of shame at all the best lemons they'd eaten in their lives, and

they drank with renewed fervor.

Mr. Colby turned to Julia: "Shall we dance?" He looked respectfully at Charlotte. "You'll be

perfectly safe here, and Julia and I shall return in a moment. They're playing a minuet, which was

my dear mother's favorite dance, and I should love to honor her memory...."

He looked so apologetic and sad about his mother (she must be recently deceased) that Charlotte

nodded, even though she had made Julia swear that she wouldn't dance, no matter what

happened. And Julia, of course, turned quickly and vanished into

the press of people.

He's not wearing a cassock, Charlotte thought rather stupidly.

And then, vaguely, one doesn't think of the mother of a curate whisking about the dance floor.

It was rather embarrassing standing alone in the ballroom. Charlotte gazed out over the dancers

as if she were looking for someone. Slowly she realized that the party wasn't, in fact, exactly

what she might have expected. Quite a few of the ladies seemed to have taken their masks off,

and their costumes were - well, revealing. For example, there was a lady dressed as Marie

Antoinette. She was carrying a shepherd's crook and was wearing a towering wig. But her dress

was so bright, and so low, Charlotte thought. Really, if it was any lower, her bosom would pop

right out. And look what she was doing with that shepherd's crook! Charlotte felt pink creeping

up her cheeks. The lady's escort was laughing and laughing, but every instinct told her that no

one behaved like that at the balls her mother attended.

But after all, this was why she and Julia had come tonight, wasn't it? Of course the atmosphere

wouldn't be exactly as it might be in London. Mr. Colby said young ladies were kept like

houseplants, and not allowed to see anything, she reminded herself. Well, this must be how

ladies and gentlemen actually behaved when they were not at debutante balls.

And so she lifted her eyes and tried to find Marie Antoinette again, but she just caught a glimpse

of her going up the stairs; actually she must have taken ill, because it looked as if her escort was

carrying her up toward the ladies' dressing room.

Then her gaze was caught by a man standing on the stairs. He leaned back against the railing as

Marie Antoinette's thick skirts brushed past him. He was tall, taller than her father, wearing a

dark green domino rather than a black one like most of the men. He looked ... he looked arrogant,

and lordly, and very handsome, even given his mask. He had broad shoulders and curly black

hair shot through with silver.

Just then a very pretty girl, dressed as Cleopatra, stopped next to him. She seemed to know him;

they were laughing and he rubbed a finger against her face. Charlotte instinctively touched her

own cheek and kept staring. From here, his eyes looked black and his eyebrows arched just as her

own did. People always said that she looked as if she had a perpetual question in mind; his

eyebrows gave an entirely different impression. They made him look a little devilish: not

childishly naughty, like Julia's curate, but altogether more dangerous. Something stirred warmly,

deep in her belly. For the first time, she saw a man whom she would like to ... to what? To kiss,

she decided. Yes, she would even like to kiss him, she thought with a delicious shiver. Although

kissing, Lady Sipperstein had said over and over, was something one did only with one's

betrotthed, and then only after all the papers were signed.

Suddenly the stranger's green domino swung elegantly out from his shoulder as he turned down

the stairs and escorted the laughing Cleopatra to the dance floor. Charlotte tried to follow them

with her eyes, even standing a bit on tiptoe, but there were too many people. He was taller than

most men so she occasionally caught glimpses of his silver-black curls. Her heart thumped

loudly.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" she said aloud. A tiny smile lit her face. She was behaving just like

Julia, falling for the first handsome man she saw. He was probably a footman. But where was

Julia? The orchestra had played at least two or three dances since she left; Charlotte had lost

track. She felt a little anger stir inside her. How could Julia leave her alone, when the ballroom

was full of people who were definitely behaving in a less than restrained manner? Even as she

watched, a stout man dressed in a frayed domino grabbed his partner by her bare shoulders and

kissed her, and they didn't even seem to notice the hissing annoyance of the other dancers who

bumped into them.

Charlotte turned a bit and stared into the corner behind the statue. The room was papered in a

perfectly unexceptional blue with gold flock. She drank up the rest of her lemonade.

Suddenly she felt a push and she toppled into the corner. She would have caught her balance, but

her head was fuzzy and so she teetered and fell forward. And the person who had shoved her fell

on top of her, heavily.

"Ow," Charlotte said. Her mask was twisted, she could feel that, and powder had fallen from her

hair all over the polished floor.

But she was whisked to her feet in a second and large hands

brushed the powder from her cloak.

She looked up. It was the man from the steps. Charlotte looked at him a bit owlishly. Just at that

moment he looked up from brushing off her cloak, met her eyes, and froze.

"Thank you," she said, remembering to smile.

He didn't move. Charlotte looked away from his eyes. They were so intent: black and deep, like

polished obsidian, she thought absurdly, and almost giggled. Would a footman wear a domino

made of thick green silk? She stole another look at him. He was younger than she thought, and

even handsomer. His eyebrows formed thick peaks over his eyes. He was still staring at her. At

her mouth, actually. Nervously she bit her lip, unable to move, caught by the intensity of his

gaze.

Then without saying a word he put his arms around her waist and pulled her against his body.

"What!" Charlotte managed to say, but he bent his head and a warm strong mouth descended on

hers. She didn't say another word, not even when his lips opened hers and his tongue lunged into

her mouth, not when he pulled back slightly and delicately traced the shape of her lips with his

tongue, and certainly not when she - she! - leaned toward him in a silent request and his mouth

took hers again.

He swung her about so that they were shadowed behind the Narcissus statue, safe from people's

eyes. Then he swiftly pulled her mask over her head. Charlotte looked up at him. He wasn't

wearing a mask anymore either. The light in the corner was

rather dim, and it enhanced the

strong planes of his face. He was staring down at her, his eyes glittering, as if she were a rhubarb

tart ready for eating, she thought. She nervously wet her lips and his eyes darkened visibly.

Charlotte still didn't say a word. In fact, she had no thought of leaving, or of speaking. She was

simply waiting. His large hands swept down her back and cupped her bottom through her cloak

and dress, and even though she knew exactly what he was doing, she mutely raised her face for

another kiss.

His mouth left hers and she felt warm breath on her ear, and shivered instinctively. A tongue

swept around her ear, and a husky voice murmured, "Very nice, a lovely ear," and swept without

a pause to reclaim her mouth again, his tongue stabbing into her mouth. Finally he stole her

tongue altogether and sucked it into his mouth.

All the time his large hands kept up a disturbing rhythm on her back, and even on her bottom. He

molded her to him, his fingers caressing her through the worn domino and her frock. He pulled

her body up against his hard muscled body; Charlotte's legs felt as if they were made of jelly.

Thinking back, she knew she couldn't have protested, even if she'd thought of it. Her body was

hardly even hers anymore. Maybe she could have said something when he put an arm behind her

shoulders and another under her knees and simply, smoothly, picked her up and backed out into

the warm garden. Instead she just leaned against his chest and felt his fast-beating heart against

her cheek.

He was gazing at her, his eyes black as and thickly fringed with lashes. Charlotte blinked, her

mind possessed by the idea of licking those lashes.

The insanity of this notion almost jerked her back to reality but then he was kissing her again and

she heard herself moan faintly.

He lowered her to the ground, and she smelled flowers and fresh grass, and felt the fierce warmth

of the large male body hovering just above her. And so it was she who wound her hands in his

curls and pulled his masculine pressure down onto her softness.

He pushed aside her cloak, but her eyes were shut tight and she was lost in the intense pleasure of

the moment. When he ducked his head and his mouth closed on her breast, Charlotte - uncaring

of the ballroom a few feet away, just on the other side of some trees - gave a moan that wasn't a

moan but almost a scream.

His mouth sent trails of fire up and down her body and especially down her legs, and she gasped

and twisted in his arms, her body instinctively arching up, her hips lifting off the soft grass. And

he was murmuring something, murmuring his strange, delicious kisses against her skin. Charlotte

strained to listen and then forgot to understand; lips moved down her body as if he were tracing

messages, teaching her a language of which she had known nothing until now.

Charlotte was on fire and exploding at the same time, and so when his face appeared over hers,

all she did was delicately put her tongue to his lips, and run her hands through his curls again.

With a muffled groan, he did something, she didn't know what, and he was pushing about her

clothing, but his hands were on her breasts and she couldn't think. And when he said, "Would

you like . . ."

in a deep, velvety hoarse voice that she still shivered to think about, she whispered, "Please," and

strained toward him for another kiss.

A knee pushed between her legs, but he was bending down to kiss her and she swept into a

swirling, breathless haze, her body ignited by the closeness of his. But then, in a split second,

pain shot through her and she screamed.

"What the belli" he said in a furious tone, rearing up on his arms. Charlotte shrunk back,

suddenly coldly sober.

Alex McDonough Foakes, future Earl of Sheffield and Dowries, looked down at the girl in

stupefaction. She was a virgin, for God's sake. She was staring up at him, absolutely white in the

face, her lips swollen with his kisses. Lovely lips, he thought wonderingly: such a dark, dark red,

and she tasted like honey. . . . And, not thinking at all, he lowered his body back down onto her

softness and claimed her lips again.

She was devastatingly beautiful, this serving girl: so wild even if she was a virgin. He didn't

remember ever feeling so frantic with need. He ran a slow hand down her lovely languorous

thigh, and in spite of herself, Charlotte squirmed against his hand.

He cupped her delicate, triangular face in his large hands and pressed kisses on her eyelids. Still

she didn't make a sound, just opened her mouth a bit and gasped when he drew his tongue over

her eyelids. Which was such an entrancing sound that even though Alex knew he had to get out

of there, stand up, deal with the unpleasant fact of having deflowered a wench, he bent back to

her lips and brushed his across hers, tantalizing, asking, demanding.

His hand ran down her thigh again and then up the inside, sliding slowly over the gossamer

silkeness of her stocking, over the slight bump of a garter at her knee, into the creamy smoothness

of her inner thigh. His hand closed over her, and her body arched again, surprised by desire for

something she had never felt before. Gasping, Charlotte stared blindly into the dark leaves

overhead.

Mindlessness descended and she moaned, small ragged sounds, parting her lips. The burning

pain of a moment ago was forgotten.

Alex stared down at her, almost puzzled. She had a perfect, aristocratic nose, and such delicate,

flyaway eyebrows. . . . She turned her head and looked squarely into his face. Her eyes were

glazed, her mouth swollen. Alex was struck by such a bolt of lust that he shuddered all over. He

reared over her again, easing his fingers from her, his knee thrusting between her legs.

But in that instant - before he could reclaim her, virgin or no - Charlotte struggled, a belated

instinct for self-preservation replacing the unwelcome coolness when his fingers left her.

Alex let her go instantly, rolled himself off to the side. Charlotte ignored how unpleasant the loss

of his heat and weight felt. She was shaking slightly all over, her heart pounding as if she'd run

for miles. She tried not to look at him as she stood up, almost stumbling from the sudden pain

between her legs, pulling her bodice up.

But she couldn't not look. He was much younger than she thought, probably only a few years

older than her brother Horace, and Horace was only twenty-five. And he was so lovely: His skin

looked golden as shadows of leaves played over his white shirt. Her eyes fell. He was politely

looking away so she rearranged herself, straightened her cloak, and put her mask back on.

The only thing she could think of, besides throwing herself back into his arms, was getting home,

so she gently laid her hand on his arm and said (with an inborn politeness which was natural to

her), "Thank you. Goodbye."

She didn't think how odd it was to say thank you for being ravished - the worst thing that could

happen to a young lady, after all.

His face jerked up when he heard her voice, but she slipped away without a backward glance and

dashed through the tall windows into the crowded ballroom before he even moved. And when

Alex cursed and sprinted after her, he couldn't distinguish her among all the cloaks and dominoes

and masks moving about the floor. Burnt yellow silk brushed shoulders with rose cotton and the

occasional greeny gold taffeta. Men dressed in shabby black coats peppered the floor. But there

wasn't a slender girl wearing a black domino to be seen.

Alex sighed. The girl couldn't have just disappeared. She must

have rejoined her party. And like

a guilty thief, struck with remorse and eager to compensate for his crimes, he needed to find her.

With a muttered curse he mentally divided the room into quarters and then patiently wove

through each quarter, surveying all the young women who reached his shoulder. But he couldn't

find her.

Yet even when he knew rationally that she must have left the ball, he kept searching, doggedly,

until the dance closed down.

She was gone. And whoever she was, she'd gone with her loss of virginity, and he'd paid nothing.

But that wasn't it, and he knew it.

He wanted to see her again. The thief was only hiding behind a wish to compensate for his

crimes: In fact, he wanted her, with an urgency that made him feel slightly insane. He wanted to

reclaim that lovely, untouched body, to kiss away her little pants, to repeat the crime again and

again and again.

The odd thing was that she sounded like a lady. And she looked like a lady. But of course no

ladies came to the Cyprians' Ball on a Saturday night, and so she was just a very clever

whore - but what was a whore thinking, to give away her most prized possession for free, in the

gardens? Alex left the ball in a ferocious temper.

That night he woke from dreams of wild seduction completely confused, gazing around his room

as if he'd never seen it before. His garden girl . . . her body had been just there, and he had been

tracing the shape of her breast with his tongue, and she was

moaning in his arms. For some

reason she had stolen into his mind and wouldn't go away.

For a few weeks Alex treasured the hope that he'd receive some sort of a ransom note from her

protectors or perhaps even from her parents, if she were a serving girl rather than a whore. He

rather hoped she was; he would protect her, and find her a house in London, a quiet little house.

But there never was a note.

And even though he went back to the Cyprians' Ball the next Saturday night, to the distress of his

brother, Patrick, who had had no fun at all the week before, she wasn't there. He also went to a

few society balls in the next two weeks, thinking if she was a lady he might see her, but he

couldn't find any tall, slender girls with green eyes. The young girls in London were bouncy and

curled and small, whereas he was looking for willowy and composed.

If only he knew the color of her hair it would be easier, but she had been wearing a ridiculous

amount of powder. Alex's domino smelled faintly of lavender for weeks. He thought about it

carefully and decided that she had red hair. With skin that white, her hair had to be red. So he

looked for a red-haired girl who smelled of lavender, and Charlotte, whose hair was -black and

who smelled of orange blossoms, never crossed his path.

When Alex wasn't dreaming about making love to her (and he didn't even think how odd it was

to use that term about a probable whore), he dreamt she was weeping, and he was comforting her,

and saying tender things. Probably, Alex told himself rationally,

he kept thinking of her because

he hadn't gone through with it and finished: But even thinking about how wet she had been, and

how small, made him pale. She couldn't be a lady; there was proof positive. No lady enjoyed sex,

let alone a virginal lady.

On her side, the truth came slowly to Charlotte. She ran into the ballroom and thankfully saw

Julia and Mr. Colby standing by the statue of Narcissus, although she didn't notice the mutinous

set of Julia's mouth. She didn't have to say anything; Julia simply shoved her across the ballroom

and out into Mr. Colby's carriage. In fact, she didn't even think until later how odd it was that no

one said a word on the way home. Her mind was so tumbled that she barely felt as if she were in

the carriage at all.

And when they got home and Julia babbled about Mr. Colby, that he had tried to kiss her - to

kiss her, Julia! - and she had had to grind her foot into his in order to make him let go, Charlotte

just sat numbly on a chair and nodded occasionally. Finally Julia stopped.

"Are you all right, Charlotte?" she asked, seeing that Charlotte's eyes were shadowed and her

face was waxen.

And Charlotte simply said, "I think I shall be ill." And she was, right on the Axminster carpet in

Julia's bedchamber. Which was problematic because it was the middle of the night and Julia did

not want to sleep in a sour-smelling room, so finally they both went into Charlotte's bedchamber

and prepared for sleep.

Except that Julia gasped when Charlotte was undressing, and when Charlotte looked down she

saw blood on her thighs and nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Oh, aren't I silly," said Julia. "You've got your monthly: Do you have the right cloths?" And

when Charlotte shook her head silently (it wasn't even due for weeks), Julia tripped off into her

room and got the necessary items.

Charlotte washed at the basin in the corner, delicately touching that part of her which stung and

ached and throbbed, and which she'd never really thought about before.

He'd ruined her, she suddenly realized. This is what is meant by ruined. She must be torn inside,

changed.

And then, like a chill blowing down her back, she understood that she could never get married,

because any man she married would find out, would know that she was ruined. Charlotte's mind

went very, very quiet, and she even managed to smile at Julia when she rushed back in the room.

She put on her soft white nightgown and curled up in bed, facing away from Julia. But she

couldn't go to sleep for a long time. And when she did, she sobbed aloud and woke up, imagining

the faces of her mother and father. What would they say if they knew? The next morning

Charlotte lay in bed feeling miserable. Julia sat next to her, sipping hot chocolate and talking.

Luckily, Julia never needed much of a response to engage in lively conversation.

"I simply cannot believe Mr. Colby's perfidy!" she repeated again and again. Charlotte noticed

that "Christopher" was now definitively "Mr. Colby."

"I just can't believe that he tried to take liberties with me!" Julia elbowed Charlotte again, trying

to get her attention. "Charlotte! This is important! He didn't just try to kiss me, you know. He put

his hand - on my breast, Charlotte! On my breast," Julia said again, emphasizing each word. "I

could have been ruined," she said with relish.

Charlotte didn't respond. Julia peered at her. "Are you quite all right, Charlotte? You're very

quiet. I could ask my mother . . . she has some good remedies for a bad monthly. Would you like

that? Oh, no," she wailed, "I couldn't! Why, she would take one look at me and see that I was

almost ruined last night!" Charlotte thought dully that Julia certainly was enjoying herself.

"Why," Julia continued, "if I hadn't trampled on his foot, just at the right moment, well, who

knows? He might have overcome my resistance!" Julia giggled. "But you know, Charlotte," she

said. "His lips were rather wet, and it was revolting ... I don't know what came over me! Kissing

the curate!" She giggled again.

Charlotte listened silently. What was the matter with her? At least Julia knew Mr. Colby. She

even adored him. But Julia hadn't lost her head. They both knew that if Julia had been able to tell

her mother, which of course she couldn't, Lady Brentorton would have approved of her response

to the curate's kiss.

But when a stranger, a total stranger, kissed Charlotte out of the blue, she collapsed into his arms

as if she were begging for more.

So Charlotte separated her guilt from her anger. How evil could the man be? He must have

thought . . . she didn't want to think what he must have thought, and quickly covered her burning

cheeks with her hands.

It was only when the huge house was quiet, around two in the afternoon, that Charlotte started to

cry. Julia had gone riding with her parents; her maid was down

in the kitchen. Charlotte soaked

her pillow with tears: for the husband she would never have, for the babies she thought to have,

for the unfairness of discovering that she - she, Charlotte - was an insatiable woman. She'd have

to stay away from men, she thought finally, after crying hopelessly for a long time. She couldn't

trust herself, that was clear. And she couldn't allow herself to be publicly ruined; her parents

would be devastated.

Finally she got out of bed and rang for a bath. She sent the maid out of the room because she

wasn't sure whether there might be other signs of her ruination. But she didn't seem to be

bleeding anymore.

It was only when she leaned back into the steaming water that Charlotte remembered her

paintings, and given the way the world had shifted in the last few hours, she allowed that to shift

too. Since she couldn't have a husband, or a baby, she could learn how to paint properly. She

would make a focus for her life in the easy sweep of new canvas and wet paint, far from the

humiliation she felt at the moment. The thought - the plan - calmed the agonizing jumble of

feelings inside Charlotte; she rose from the bath and allowed Julia's maid to button her into a

chaste white gown.

As Charlotte's world fell into before and after, so did the world of her mother. When Charlotte

returned to Albemarle Square the next day, she didn't say much. She looked at her mother with a

tearless, somber look that made her mother want simultaneously

to shake her and to burst into

tears. What on earth had happened to Charlotte? She wasn't herself anymore, as the duchess told

her husband in bewilderment. Charlotte became moody and even harsh.

If the truth be told, Adelaide was exhausted, too exhausted to deal with a new, irritable Charlotte.

Presentations were tiring. The planning had taken weeks, and just this week Gunter's had put up a

fuss about the ices. She had ordered ices colored a delicate violet, and they appeared with a

violently purple sample. The footman who was set to washing the center chandelier broke

seventeen crystals before anyone noticed he was dead drunk. The new gown she had ordered

(blue velvet, embroidered with silver fleur-de-lis) was ghastly. The sleeves were short and far too

tight, and the overdress sagged, making her look old and matronly. So she had to pay four times

the price to have Madame Flancot create a new gown of rose brocade, practically overnight.

And then, the very day before the ball, Charlotte announced that she wouldn't go to any balls,

including her own presentation.

Adelaide stared at her in disbelief. She turned sharply to Charlotte's maid, Marie.

"Fetch Violetta, please, Marie. And then you may go."

Marie slipped from the room. Her mistress must have gone crazy. That beautiful dress! How

could she even think of not wearing it? Charlotte's sister Violetta strolled into the bedroom with

all the nonchalance of someone with two seasons behind her and an almost-for-certain marriage

proposal from the Marquess of Blass.

Violetta tried persuasion. "You know, Lottie," she said, reverting to Charlotte's pet name from

childhood, "I was terrified at my coming out ball. Mama had the place absolutely covered in

white lilies - which was very nice, Mama," she hastened to add, "but the perfume was so

powerful. When I slipped downstairs to see the ballroom in the afternoon, I just kept sneezing

and sneezing, and we all panicked. But then Campion suggested scotch, which he said was a

perfect remedy for sneezing, and he was right. Of course," she said meditatively, "I don't

remember much of what happened after the glass of scotch, but at least I didn't sneeze all

evening."

Charlotte just looked at her sister miserably. She hadn't cried since leaving Julia's house, but she

felt like it, all the time. One minute she was desperate to see that man again; the next she was

consumed with rage and self-pity.

Violetta sat down next to her on the bed, so close their shoulders were touching. "I wouldn't

worry, Charlotte.

You're the most beautiful of us three, you know. You always have been. And you're the reason

for the whole ball: You don't have to worry about not having someone to dance with. . . ."

Charlotte just shook her head. Why go? She couldn't get married; she might as well start the way

she meant to go on. She felt, in her old nurse's phrase, as stubborn as a pig about it.

"It's no use, Violetta," her mother broke in. "She's set against it!

Why? Why, Charlotte!"

Adelaide's voice rose perilously near a shriek. "At the least you owe me an explanation, after all

the work I've done. If you'd said four months ago you didn't want this ball we could have

discussed it rationally. But now you must tell me why you won't attend the ball or I shall summon

your father!" Adelaide was sitting on the stool of the dressing table, her eyes fixed on Charlotte's

face. Violetta was staring at her equally intently from her other side. Charlotte felt as if she were

being squeezed between two walls, as if she couldn't breathe. She looked down at her lap. Her

hands were twisting, one over the other, around and around. She felt hot and nauseated. From

outside her window came the rhythmic pounding of workmen building a huge marquee in the

garden, for the supper at her ball.

"All right, Mama," she finally said.

"All right what!" snapped her mother.

"I'll tell you why," said Charlotte slowly. She couldn't look up, so she steadily regarded her linked

fingers. "I went to a ball in Kent," she said, "secretly. It wasn't Julia's fault; I wanted to go too. It

was a masked ball and I powdered my hair, so no one could recognize me."

Violetta had gone very still next to her. Her mother was staring at her in fascinated horror. She

was too dumbfounded to ask why Charlotte had broken all the rules she spent years drilling

into each of her three daughters' heads.

"And what happened?" Adelaide finally said, evenly, when the room had been silent for several

minutes.

Charlotte raised her miserable eyes to her mother's. "I met a man," she said, her voice trembling.

"I met a man and I went into the garden with him."

Whatever was in Charlotte's eyes made all the anger in Adelaide's chest melt like snow. She

whisked over to Charlotte's side, tucked herself against the headboard, and pulled her daughter

into her arms.

"It's all right, darling," she whispered, rubbing Charlotte's arm and kissing the top of her head,

just as she had when Charlotte was a little girl and stubbed her toe. Charlotte didn't respond, but

she didn't pull away. A silky curtain of hair fell over her face as she leaned on her mother's chest.

"But - what happened then?" Violetta asked. "What do you mean, you went into the garden? Did

you let him kiss you? What was it like? Did you enjoy it?" She reached over and gave Charlotte's

hip a little poke.

Her mother gave her a look she had rarely seen before. "Be quiet, Violetta," she said.

And Violetta didn't say another word. She had been about to admit to visiting the garden herself,

with the marquess just last week, and she had quite liked it. But Charlotte had never been very

interested in men . . . unless, and Violetta's eyes grew round with horror, Charlotte allowed this

man to take liberties with her, with her person. She drew in her breath and opened her mouth

again, but her mother's eye caught hers and she relapsed into silence.

Adelaide gathered her thoughts. Unlike Violetta, she had an

excellent idea what had happened.

Her little Charlotte, her baby. Why, she thought, had she been violated. By a man whom she

could kill with her own bare hands. She clutched Charlotte closer.

Finally she cleared her throat and eased Charlotte into a sitting position. She put both hands on

Charlotte's shoulders and looked straight into Charlotte's tearless green eyes.

"Are you all right, darling? Do you need me to ... should I summon Dr. Pargeter?" Charlotte

turned even paler, and just shook her head violently.

Adelaide stared at her silently. She needed to find out exactly what happened, but not in front of

Violetta.

"Violetta," she said. She couldn't even think of a good excuse.

"Violetta," she repeated, looking

at her elder daughter over Charlotte's bent shoulders, "I want you to go to your chamber. No

arguments," she said firmly, heading off Violetta's protest. "I will visit you in a few minutes and

we will discuss all of this. Until then, no one is to know, Violetta, particularly not Alice." Alice

was Violetta's maid.

So Violetta walked slowly out of the room, confident that she could pry all the details out of her

mama later. Mama, she thought complacently, had always been putty in the hands of a good

questioner. Why, she knew all about things she really oughtn't to, such as what happened

between a man and his wife, for example. She bet that Charlotte had never asked mama anything,

and so she had no idea. Or perhaps she had? Violetta trailed back

to her room, bursting with

questions.

When they were alone, Charlotte drew a shuddering breath and started sobbing and speaking

incoherently. "Oh, Mama, I met a man ... in the garden. I kissed him. I didn't think - he kissed

me." Her voice broke on a sob and she bent her forehead against her mother's shoulder. How

could she say it, what really happened? Her mother would be ...

"I went with him, Mama," she finally said, raising her head and meeting her mother's eyes

painfully. "I went into the garden with him, behind the trees, and he ... he took my clothing apart.

I'm so, I'm so - I didn't stop him."

Adelaide listened silently, stroking her daughter's arm. It was both worse and better than she

feared. At least Charlotte had not been raped. But she did seem to have abandoned all of the rules

of society in an act of such recklessness that Adelaide's stomach twisted just to hear about it.

Behind the trees! Anyone could have seen them! "What was his name?" Adelaide asked.

"I don't know!" "You don't know," Adelaide managed, and then, "Charlotte, he wasn't one of

Squire Brentorton's footmen, was he?" Charlotte gulped. "He could have been, Mama." She

began to weep even harder. Details flowed out amid sobs: the ball, silver-black hair, a green

domino, the curate, the statue of Narcissus, the lemonade made with poor lemons.

Adelaide's hand stopped its soothing motion. Who was this man? Charlotte's description was

none too exact, and there were so many gentlemen in London - if

he was a gentleman, Adelaide

thought bleakly. He certainly hadn't acted like one. But Charlotte hadn't acted like a lady, either.

Something nudged the back of her memory, something she'd heard about a young man with

silver-shot hair, but she couldn't quite remember what. They would just have to hope. She

decided to send someone to Kent immediately to investigate the masked ball.

Finally Charlotte was cried out, and Adelaide came to a decision. She pushed Charlotte into a

sitting position again.

"Now," she said firmly. "We simply have to forget that this whole incident happened." She

looked into Charlotte's eyes with every bit of maternal authority she could summon. "You cannot

allow your life to be ruined because you had a momentary indiscretion in a garden, Charlotte.

"We have all been indiscreet on occasion. Why - " She paused and looked at her daughter's

innocent eyes. Not so innocent anymore, she reminded herself. This was going to be difficult.

She had always thought of Charlotte as the daughter untouched by desire. In fact, she'd probably

been much sterner with Violetta, given that Violetta was a girl one might picture enjoying a tryst

in the garden! But Charlotte . . .

"Well, your father and I did exactly what you just did, before we got married. In fact, we weren't

even en-gaged."

Charlotte looked at her with a gleam of interest. "You did?" "We did," her mother replied. "Not, I

am glad to say, in the garden. It was . . . well, I won't say where,

but I will tell you that it was

likely just as uncomfortable as your garden, and only slightly less imprudent. Believe me, child,

people do odd things all the time.

You were just terribly lucky." She gave her a brief hug.

"No one knows." Adelaide looked sternly into Charlotte's eyes. "If no one knows, then it didn't

happen. Did you hear me Charlotte?" She gave her a shake. "It did not happen."

Charlotte looked back numbly. Her mother must be insane. What did she mean it didn't

happen? She could feel the man's body on her own at this very moment. She gave a little

shudder. "But, Mama," she said uncomfortably. They had never discussed things like this before.

"There was, at least, I, there was some blood, and . . ."

"Virginity," her mother said astoundingly, "is a state of the body and mind. And believe me,

child, I stayed a virgin for a good two weeks. You'll see: When you find yourself in this situation

again - married this time - it will hurt just as much the second time, and the third. There really

isn't any magical formula. You may not bleed on your wedding night, but actually many women

never do bleed at all.

"You are going to this ball. You are going to have a good time, because you are my daughter, and

I didn't raise you to be a whiner.

You made a mistake, and luckily you got away with it. You must never think about it again,

ever."

In the back of her mind, Adelaide reminded herself to send someone down to Kent to investigate

that ball (better talk to Campion; he was so discreet). And she must remember to check, casually,

that her daughter's monthly flux appeared on time.

"You are beautiful and young, and a lovely person, Charlotte," Adelaide said seriously, stroking

her daughter's hair. "When you fall in love and get married, it will be just as if it were the first

time. Because in reality it will be the first time. You must forget this."

You must forget this, Charlotte told herself dutifully that night in bed, on the morning of the ball,

in the later afternoon as Marie delicately arranged the folds of her white ball gown, adorned with

white-on-white embroidery and the faintest of pale green love knots.

The whole house hummed with noise. All the furniture in the reception rooms had been removed

and stored. Every bit of space was needed for the five hundred gentlefolk expected. Cartloads of

soft blue and deeper blue velvety delphiniums had arrived that morning and been arranged in

huge vases. Huge swags of delphiniums adorned the staircase leading up from the drawing rooms

to the ballroom, and the temporary staircase from the marquee in the garden to the house was

lined in them.

"It's quite blue," Charlotte said rather faintly to her mother as they stood surveying the ballroom

in the late afternoon. The parquet floor had been polished so brightly that the blue flowers

doubled themselves on the floor. The whole room looked like an indigo ocean.

"You'll see, darling," her mother said confidently. "When the rooms are full of ladies and all the

candles are shining, this blue will make a splendid background. Now, off you go and see if

Monsieur Pamplemousse is finished with Violetta's hair. He will take at least an hour, and you

know we must eat by eight o'clock tonight, since the invitations are for half past nine."

Charlotte wandered upstairs. How could she forget what had happened? Even now she could

imagine the chiseled warmth of his lips descending on hers, the strength of his huge hands

gripping her shoulders and sliding down her back. How does one forget something like that? Oh,

why hadn't she said something! She was such a booby; she should have said - what? "Please, sir,

what is your name? Reginald? And is it nice being a footman?" Charlotte stifled a giggle. She did

see her mother's point. Forget this, she said firmly to herself.

Still, she couldn't stop hoping. Maybe he was a nobleman, or a gentleman. Maybe he would come

to her ball, and she would meet his gaze across the room, just as she had at the other ball. And

maybe he would shoulder his way through the crowd and bow before her. Charlotte's eyes

glowed.

The Duchess of Calverstill's ball for her youngest daughter was a triumph. By half past eight,

spectators were thronging the streets outside Calverstill House, hoping to see nobility, even

royalty, going in. By eleven o'clock the ball was clearly the success of the season. Everyone who

counted was there, and several scandals were circulating briskly, which made the party all the

more delightful.

The formidable Lady Molyneaux herself had declared that Adelaide's delphinium scheme was

"delicious"; she and her fellow patrons of Almack's had graciously extended permission for

Charlotte to enter the sacred premises. The ball continued until dawn, long after supper was

served in the marquee around midnight.

And as to whether Charlotte had a good time: well, she survived. Charlotte didn't enjoy it, her

mother thought as she undressed in the wee hours. Anyone could tell that. Charlotte's eyes kept

scanning the room anxiously, as if the guest of honor hadn't arrived, and finally she burst into

tears and had to be quietly whisked off to the upper reaches of the house.

But she looked lovely, Adelaide comforted herself. Many young ladies at their debuts were

nauseated with pure nervousness, and if Charlotte was a bit, well, damp, who would blame her?

Of course, no one in the ballroom was advised that the lady of honor had retired weeping to bed.

Around two in the morning Adelaide looked up from the middle of a rather slow cotillion and

saw two young men standing at the top of the stairs, looking down into the ballroom.

She froze and stopped dead in her tracks, causing her partner, the Honorable Sylvester Bredbeck,

to stumble slightly.

"Sylvester!" Adelaide said sharply. "Who are those young men?" Sylvester looked around. "Well,

they're not bounders, m'dear," he said comfortably. Sylvester had been her dear friend for years,

and anyone he didn't know wasn't worth knowing. "I think the one on the left is Sheffie's heir

(he's a trifle taller) and the other's his brother. Let me see, I believe the heir is called Alexander

and his brother is ... Patrick. They are twins, as you can see, but Alexander got five minutes on

Patrick and about two million pounds on account of it."

Sylvester guided Adelaide through a few more slow turns while she thought furiously. Of course!

Sheffie was Sylvester's friend the Earl of Sheffield and Downes, and that was his heir, and his

younger son . . . and they both had silver-shot hair. What on earth should she do? Perhaps she

should excuse herself, dash upstairs, force Charlotte back into the dress, and bring her down? But

then Adelaide despairingly remembered Charlotte's reddened eyes. Besides, these probably

weren't the right men, or man, and Charlotte would be horribly disappointed.

The two men were still staring down into the ballroom. He's looking for her, Charlotte's mother

thought suddenly. He's here because of her. Adelaide's heart warmed a little to him - well, to

whom? Which he was the right man? They looked exactly the same to her. I certainly hope

Charlotte will know the difference, she thought a little tartly.

Even as she watched, they wheeled and left the ballroom. Couldn't find her, so they left, Adelaide

thought. Well, how very interesting. And I was quite right not to disturb Charlotte, because this is

just the beginning of the season. Why, when she herself came out she attended fifty balls and

sixty-three breakfasts, and if Charlotte didn't encounter the future Earl of Sheffield and Downes

and his brother within the next week, she'd be astonished! "Sylvester, m'dear," said the duchess,

leading her partner off the floor. "I should like a glass of lemonade, and a talk. Because we

haven't talked all night, and you know I have to dance every single one of these dances, so I

haven't had a moment of conversation."

Sylvester was charmed. "My dearest wish is to sit at your side, Your Grace," he said cheerfully,

although he was a bit nonplussed to find that the subject of conversation was one and only one:

the future Earl of Sheffield and Downes and his brother. But, like most men, Sylvester was a

born gossip; he simply didn't bother to hide his inclinations. He bent his head near Adelaide's ear

and agreeably related tales of Oxford mishaps and a reported fistfight at Vauxhall two years ago,

when the brothers were accompanied by a lady of easy virtue and came to blows with another

"friend" of hers. Then he burred on with a few more tales expunged of too racy material.

But he said enough to convince Adelaide that Charlotte probably wasn't the first maiden this

Alexander, or Patrick, had deflowered in a garden, and to explain why she herself didn't know

them. Apparently the twins didn't spend much time in respectable surroundings. Another point

which suggests that one of them came here looking for Charlotte, Adelaide thought.

Still, they were gentlemen, nay, they were noblemen. And their papa was friends with her

husband, Marcel, and if one of them had a hand in this, Marcel would make perfectly sure that he

offered marriage by tomorrow night.

"I hear," Sylvester rambled on, "that Sheffie is thinking of separating them; they're just too wild

together. He was talking of sending the boys off to the Continent, or maybe it was one of them

off to Europe, or some such thing, and I think the other one to the Orient ... I don't remember

exactly what he was planning, but that was it: yes, one to Europe and the other to the Orient.

Probably get taken by pirates over in the East; he'd better not send his heir.

"Sheffie's not here, is he?" Sylvester peered around for Woodleigh Foakes, the actual Earl of

Sheffield and Downes.

"No," Adelaide said absently. "I think he's poorly again; he suffers horribly from gout, you

know."

Just then the music ended and the duchess's next partner, Sir Walter Mitford, appeared at her

elbow as if by magic. Sylvester bowed, a little creakily (he'd taken to wearing corsets in the past

few years), and her young partner led Adelaide onto the floor.

Sylvester stood for a moment, his lips pursed. I wonder why she's so interested in those boys, he

thought, his gossip-loving soul sniffing a scandal. Probably no scandal, he thought with a sigh.

One tended to forget that Adelaide was the mother of three girls, but she was. And the Foakes

heir would be an excellent match.

The duchess herself puzzled over the situation throughout a country dance with Sir Walter.

Finally she decided to let events take their course and say nothing to Charlotte about the future

earl or his brother. She and Charlotte and Violetta were going to Almack's tomorrow night and

those men almost certainly wouldn't show up there; they were

too young to be hanging out for

wives, and Almack's was nothing but a marriage mart, she thought dispassionately. But in four

days the Prince of Wales was giving a ball that all the ton would attend. The Foakes brothers

might come late, she thought, given their appearance tonight, but she'd keep Charlotte there till

dawn if she had to. And so, having worked the whole problem out to her satisfaction, she

dismissed it from her mind and turned back to her partner.

But that wasn't the last she saw of Alexander and Patrick that evening: no, not by any means.

Around an hour later, Adelaide found herself confronted by her husband's aunt Margaret, a fierce

woman in her eighties. Margaret accepted without comment the news that Charlotte had retired

for the night and could not bid her good-bye, but she demanded to see her nephew. So Adelaide

began weaving through the people left in the ballroom, looking for her husband. The ballroom

itself was finally clearing out, but people were still crowding the hallways and reception rooms.

At the end of the first-floor hallway, to the right of the huge marble staircase, was the chamber

they called the Green Room. It had a huge, old grand piano that had been deemed too much

trouble to remove. Adelaide did not find Marcel there, but she did find the two sons of the Earl of

Sheffield and Downes.

As she paused in the doorway she heard a strong, sweet voice raised in song. One of the twins

was seated at the piano, with his back to her, singing in a beautiful baritone. For a moment she

paused in pleasure. Young women were forced to take piano and voice lessons as part of the

accoutrements of young ladyhood; it was rare to meet a gentleman with the same skills. And he

did have a superb voice.

His brother was leaning negligently against a pillar off to the right. The singer himself was

surrounded by a pale, fluttering group of debutantes who had somehow shaken off their

chaperones, Adelaide thought, her eyes sharpening a bit. Of course - the chaperones must have

gone off to the marquee for a bite to eat, and the young women had gathered here. Not proper,

she thought firmly.

Suddenly the little flock of three maidens convulsed into soft gales of laughter, but the male

voice continued. And for the first time Adelaide actually heard what he was singing: "The touch

of her hand increases his flame, Who conquer'd by charms a captive doth lie; And when he but

thinks of his true love's name, He vows for her sake he could freely die: Then she revives him

again with a kiss, He cries you undo me, undo me, undo me, Had ever poor soul such pleasure as

this?" Adelaide's mouth fell open. He could "die," indeed! Why, that young heathen was singing

bawdy tunes to society misses.

She moved forward sharply, her skirt brushing the door portals. The nonsinging brother looked

up at her from his pillar.

"Patrick," he said abruptly. "We have company. And I believe" - he pulled himself gracefully

upright and walked over to her - "we have been joined by our

hostess herself."

The girls swung around quickly, and little Barbara Lewnstown actually turned pink.

"Girls," Adelaide said in a faintly admonishing tone. "Are you alone? Where's your mother,

Barbara?" Barbara answered, rather faintly. "Well, she went off with Sissy's mother" - she

flapped her hand at Cecilia Commonweal behind her - "but it's all right, Your Grace. These are

my cousins, you know."

Of course, she did know that, Adelaide thought, but she'd totally forgotten. She cast a stern eye

on the handsome young man who had swivelled around on the piano bench and stood up, and

now was looking sweetly at her. If this was Patrick, he was the younger one. My goodness, these

boys are a devastating pair, she thought.

Patrick swept into an elegant bow, picking up her hand and kissing it. His eyes twinkled

wickedly under his mop of silver-black curls. Despite herself, Adelaide felt a little feminine

thrill.

"Your Grace," said Patrick Foakes, "may I sing you a song?" He threw her a glance full of

mischievousness. "A most proper song, of course."

And without even thinking of Aunt Margaret, waiting impatiently by now, perhaps even beating

her stick on the parquet, Adelaide twinkled back.

"Very short, and very proper," she said.

Patrick swung onto the piano bench and poised his large hands over the keyboard. His voice

wound into the notes of a teasing, light song: "You ladies who are young and gay, Since time too

swiftly flies away, Bestow your hours of leisure, bestow your hours of leisure On courts, on

gardens, springs, and groves, On conversation's lawful loves, And ev'ry harmless pleasure, ev'ry,

ev'ry harmless pleasure."

Wickedly, he accented harmless pleasure with an ironic deepening of his voice, so that even

Adelaide couldn't prevent herself from laughing out loud.

"Enough!" she said, still chortling. "Girls, shall we return to the ballroom?" And she ushered the

three young women before her, not missing the languishing look cast back by Miss Isabella

Riddleford. I wonder which one she's after, Adelaide thought, and looked back herself.

The older twin, Alexander, was standing quite straight and watching them with a slight frown.

His deep black eyes caught hers.

Well, Adelaide thought, I certainly hope Charlotte went into the garden with the singer! This one

is so moody-looking. One of Adelaide's friends had a husband who brooded and Adelaide felt

tired just hearing about his woes.

She turned briskly and herded her charges into the ballroom.

"I didn't see the girl herself," said one young gallant, the Honorable Peter Medley, to a friend the

next morning in White's.

"I did," said his friend Justin. "She was nothing special. None of the bounce her sister has. But

did you hear what the Foakes twins got up to later? I heard that Alex knocked out three of the

watch before they managed to calm him down."

Peter looked at Justin suspiciously. Since when did he know the future Earl of Sheffield and

Downes well enough to call him Alex? "Where'd you hear that?" he asked.

"From old Beckley." Justin nodded across the room. Sure enough, Beckworth Cecily clearly had

burning news to relate; he was surrounded by a small group of men whose faces mingled open

amusement and condemnation.

So Adelaide's plans for the prince's ball came to naught. By four days later it was open

knowledge that Woodleigh Foakes had ordered his sons onto ships bound for the Continent and

the Orient. Just as the Honorable Sylvester had surmised, the heir (Alexander) was bound for

Italy and die spare (as he was jocularly known) was bound for more exotic, if dangerous, travels

in India.

They weren't expected back for at least two years.

Adelaide kept silent, wondering if she should have dashed up the stairs and dragged Charlotte

down to the ball. For a few weeks she was tormented by regret: What if she had? What if

Charlotte had been seduced by one of the Foakes twins? What if they had come to the ball

specifically looking for Charlotte? Finally her common sense comforted her. There were so many

men in England with silver-black hair.

Then Campion brought her the succinctly worded report of a Bow Street Runner who wrote that

the Saturday night Cyprians' Ball was a regular feature of the Kent countryside. It was attended

by nobles and gentlemen, but also by every other sort of person including, of course, prostitutes.

And hearing where Charlotte had been, Adelaide felt sick but

resigned. Most likely Charlotte was
right. She had met a handsome footman in the twilight.
Besides, Adelaide had other problems. Charlotte's ball may have
been a success but Charlotte
herself was not. She spent hours in her room painting. She went
to balls only when threatened
with terrible punishments like the removal of her canvases. She
hung listlessly around the edges
of rooms full of her chattering contemporaries, and complained
of boredom. She developed a
cool, impenetrable glance that ranged over the assembled ranks
of men and dismissed them all. It
was a brave twenty-two-year-old who requested a second dance
with her, since she seemed to
have no small conversation and terrified empty-headed young
gentlemen by asking them what
they thought of events on the Continent.
After a while, Adelaide forgot about the dark eyes of Alexander
the senior and the velvety voice
of Patrick the junior. And Charlotte presumably forgot about her
tryst in the garden ... at any rate,
it was never mentioned between them again. Mother and
daughter spent their time, if the truth be
known, bickering over Charlotte's refusal to attend society
functions and her contemptuous air
when she did.
Adelaide didn't understand that, to Charlotte, the young men she
met paled next to the memory of
his face; Charlotte didn't understand her mother's growing terror
at the prospect of her daughter's
marriageless future. She had taken to painting flowers, and she
was happiest in her room,
delicately copying the dusky gold shade of a lily.

To Charlotte, the future was clear. She wouldn't marry one of the silly boys she had met so far;

she probably wouldn't marry at all.

The prospect didn't bother her too much. What did bother her was wasted time and slow dances,

tepid lemonade and too-tight dresses.

By a year later she too thought only rarely about the man she met in the garden. When she did

think about the experience, she saw it as a lucky event that made her a woman overnight and

taught her to see what she wanted. Without it, she'd have been herded into some man's arms by

the end of her first season, Charlotte thought contemptuously. She'd probably be pregnant by

now, and her husband would be romping at Ascot while she was left at home.

Charlotte stood back from her easel, looking at her latest picture, of a tawny tiger lily. The lines

of the stem were not perfect, but the color was splendid. This, she thought, was a far better life.

London, England May 1801 The spring Charlotte turned twenty, her family gave up hope of her

marrying. In the three seasons since she had come out she had done surprisingly well,

considering that she rarely attended balls and had to be coaxed into attending garden parties and

tea parties and rides in the park, the normal activities for gently bred young ladies.

But when she did come to a ball, she was never ignored. After her miserable first year, she

gathered a circle of gentlemen about her who applauded her wit. If they secretly admired her

lovely curves, they quickly learned to keep silent. Even the most innocent of compliments, say a

comparison of Lady Charlotte's eyes to stars, was met by a calm but freezing withdrawal.

"I can't understand it," the Earl of Slaslow gloomily told a friend, leaning in the corner of

Almack's and watching Charlotte gracefully circle the floor. "I didn't even think that much of her

in the beginning, but she . . ."

"I know," said David Marlowe, a mere younger son of a squire, destined for the clergy. "I know:

She ignored your compliments, and piqued your curiosity, and now you are caught. Women!"

David was disgusted. Clearly the little baggage was playing Slaslow like a fisherman with a trout.

No one would honestly refuse the Earl of Slaslow's attention. Why, Braddon was the best catch

on the market this year, if one discounted the enormously wealthy, but terribly old, Duke of

Siskind. And Siskind was just looking for a nurse to take care of his eight children, everyone

knew that.

But here was Braddon, as glum as a trout on the river-bank, and this Charlotte had turned him

down for a second dance, that was a fact. At this very moment, she was circling the floor for the

second time with that old gossip Sylvester Bredbeck. And chortling with laughter at a story

Sylvester was telling her.

"Why don't you write her a poem or something?" David suggested, nudging his friend.

"I did," Braddon said dismally. "It wasn't bad either. I pretty much stole it out of one of the old

books lying around my library, you know."

David did. Not that he'd read any of those books, of course, but

he'd had many a smoky game of
piquet in Braddon's walnut-paneled library.

"It wasn't bad," Braddon insisted. "I said that her hair had pearls
threaded on each strand,

something like that, and that her eyes were suns and her teeth
were crystals."

"Pearls - threaded on each strand," David repeated dubiously. "I
don't know, Braddon. What'd

she say?" "She laughed." The earl crossed his arms over his chest.
"She just laughed, and she said

thank you, and then later she accidentally sat on the poem." He
looked mutinous at David's snort

of laughter.

"Wilkins had copied the whole thing out, on parchment, mind
you, and he tied it with a ribbon

and a flower. But she got up to greet someone, and then sat on it
Crumpled the whole thing, and

she did not see it." David looked at Charlotte with greater
curiosity. A woman who crumpled the

Earl of Slaslow's literary efforts (no matter how poor) really was
quite different from the

run-of-the-mill young miss.

"The thing is," Braddon continued, lowering his voice a bit, "I
could see living with her, you

know? I have to get married - I mean, my mother is after me like
one of those Furies in Greek

drama, you remember them? Well, she doesn't have snakes for
hair, but really, it's the same idea.

She snaps at me every morning." Braddon shuddered slightly.
"And my sister, Marge, is the

same. You'd think she would be happy enough with her own four
brats, but no, she's after me all

the time to - to spawn" he ended savagely.

David weighed the trouble of being urged to spawn against that of being a younger son whom no

one would ever want to marry, given his complete lack of income. Still, he was free. He was in

Almack's only because he was visiting his old friend; it wasn't him that all those hungry-looking

young women kept eyeing.

And this Charlotte: She was beautiful, in her own way. She was wearing a rather plain gown, but

even so, one could tell that she had a lovely bosom. Her hair was so black that it kept catching

the gleam of the chandeliers overhead.

"I think you should do it," he said firmly. "Look around here. All these girls look alike. Now, if

that one can laugh, and she can ride a horse - she can, can't she?" David paused anxiously.

Braddon lived for his stables.

"She rides like a dream," Braddon said.

David cast another glance at him: Braddon really was far gone. "Well, why don't you pop the

question, then?" "You think so?" asked the Earl of Slaslow anxiously.

"Definitely," said his closest friend. "You could even ask her father now; I think he's in the card

room."

"Oh, no," said Braddon, lounging back into the corner. "My mama's been dinning this whole

thing into my ears for months. I go in the morning and send in my card, and then I see her pa, and

then I see her, and the most I do is kiss her forehead, so I don't scare her off."

There was a little pause.

David was feeling sorry for Braddon's mother. The new earl had a

head as hard as brick; David

clearly remembered trying to fix certain facts in Braddon's skull during their time at Eton, just

basic ones, like the date of the Battle of Hastings. If you repeated things about eight times, they

would stick for a matter of a few hours, long enough for an exam. It was always touch and go.

Yet surely asking for a girl's hand in marriage couldn't be that difficult.

And that was how Charlotte conquered the biggest catch on the market. She rejected him just as

quickly. When her papa summoned Charlotte for a private meeting with the Earl of Slaslow,

Charlotte turned Braddon down flat, gently explaining that she liked him enormously, but

wouldn't he be happier with Miss Barbara Lewnstown? Barbara and Braddon seemed so

well-suited, given that she loved horses just as much as he did.

Charlotte's mother went to bed for three whole days, and wouldn't speak to her daughter for two

weeks. Braddon went away glum and unconvinced, and when he next glimpsed Miss Lewnstown

he gave a ferocious grimace and turned away.

By 1801, Charlotte had received solid offers of marriage from some eight gentlemen, only two of

them known to be interested in her dowry. The other six wooed her for her green eyes and her

slow, unhurried smiles.

No, Charlotte will never get married, her mother and father admitted, lying in the ducal bed on a

Thursday evening.

"It's the painting!" the duchess said. "Oh, Marcel, she'll dwindle into an old maid . . . I'm so

unhappy," she said in a burst, tears rolling down her face.

"Well," said Marcel uncomfortably. "Violetta married quite late; why give up hope for

Charlotte?" Marcel was a large, quiet man whose French first name had been given to him by his

romantic mother. It had caused him quite a bit of embarrassment in the past few years, especially

in 1797 when republican France threatened to invade England.

"I think," he said, settling his wife's head firmly into the crook of his shoulder, "we should just

loosen the reins a little. What if she doesn't want to go to parties? Let her paint." He thought of

adding the fact that he was tired of arguments about balls, but he didn't.

The duchess wriggled her head against her husband's shoulder. He was a sweet man, but he had

no idea of the daily vexations that greeted a woman who never married, the snubs and insults that

were already being doled out to Charlotte.

"But what about when . . . where will she live?" Adelaide said despairingly. "Horace will inherit

this house and the one in the country, and he'll want to start a family, and who's to say that he

would want a maiden sister living with him, especially one who has a reputation for an

unladylike interest in painting!" "I'll tell you what," said her spouse comfortably. "The other two

girls are settled. Winnie's husband will never lack blunt and Violetta's marquess is doing just

fine. I'll turn that Welsh estate over to Charlotte, you know, the one that I inherited from Aunt

Beatrice. It's not entailed, and it turns a pretty profit. With the land and her dowry, she'll be right

and tight."

Adelaide thought about it. Their eldest daughter, Winifred, had married Austen Saddlesford, a

madly wealthy American, and gone off happily to live in Boston, and Violetta had married the

Marquess of Blass, and indeed, neither girl was hurting for money. And Horace would inherit all

the ducal holdings; he wouldn't begrudge the Welsh inheritance.

Characteristically, she saw it from a slightly different angle than did her husband. Marcel

thought, kindly enough, that with the Welsh rents Charlotte could live comfortably and buy a

house in London if she wished. But what Adelaide immediately grasped was that the Welsh

estate - a little Elizabethan manor house and its land - would turn Charlotte from the very

well-endowed daughter of a duke into being a remarkable heiress. And that, she thought sagely,

would perk up interest in her daughter and what's more, would stop tongues wagging about her

being old maid. A great heiress just didn't fit the category, somehow.

One never knew; perhaps the right man would come along for Charlotte, and now it wouldn't

matter if he wasn't wealthy.

"Marcel, you are a wonder," Adelaide said gratefully, rubbing her hair against his shoulder like a

silken cat. So the season of 1801 opened on a rather different note for Charlotte. Ignoring all her

protests, her father had signed over to her a quite vast amount of land in Wales.

"You might as well get used to the responsibility while I'm around to advise you," he said,

signing the last papers with a flourish of his quill. The duke's thin, prunelike lawyer, Mr.

Jennings of Jennings and Condell, shuddered delicately, inside of course. Jennings and Condell

did not approve of women holding property of any kind and Mr. Jennings foresaw endless bother

after the Duke of Calverstill passed away.

On her side, Charlotte quickly realized that owning a house made her very happy. She owned a

manse in Wales; twenty-three people lived and farmed near the house, and some three hundred

sheep grazed on her land, according to the manager's report.

She read the latest reports over and over. The newspaper gained an interest that it never had

before. When workers destroyed looms in the Cots-wolds, she shuddered. What if riots spread to

Wales? As soon as possible, she promised herself, she would go to Wales. She could just

imagine her mother's horror if she suggested such a thing now (the trip! the dirt!), but perhaps in

the fall . . . with a chaperone, of course.

And the season was better because it seemed to Charlotte that her mother was becoming more

comfortable with her rejection of eight worthy suitors. Adelaide stopped looking at her with a

pained expression. They even began speaking again without sorrowful innuendoes underlying

every conversation.

In fact, Charlotte didn't notice immediately that her mother was no longer prodding her into

attending social events. One night she walked into the dining room and realized the room was

bare.

"Where are my parents, Champion?" she asked the butler.

"I believe the duchess is attending a fete de champagne given by Lady Bridgeplate, and I am not

cognizant of the duke's location," Champion replied, holding out her chair with a flourish.

Charlotte looked at the table. "What are we eating tonight, Champion?" she asked.

Champion brightened. He loved to talk about food, although this family simply didn't appreciate it

as they ought to. "Poulet a la diable, crab re'moulade, and raises a la Chantilly."

"Oh," Charlotte said flatly.

She sat down and stared at the steaming consomme that Champion placed tenderly before her. The

solitary life was, well, so solitary. . . . Perhaps she should find a companion. She thought of an

elderly lady with a cap, and pursed her lips. Perhaps not. Two old maids, she thought. She didn't

feel bitter, but it did seem tedious.

Perhaps she had made an error. In the course of fending off eight marriage proposals, Charlotte

had discovered that, in fact, she didn't have a wanton sexual response to each and every man who

tried to kiss her. When the Earl of Slaslow offered his well-phrased and elegant proposal, she

responded in dulcet tones; when he refused rejection and hauled her into his arms, kissing her

fiercely, she didn't respond at all. Instead she stood with her mouth tightly closed and except for

grinding his teeth against her lips, there was nothing he could do about that. So Braddon gave up

and backed away, even pouting a little.

On the other hand, when the well-known fortune hunter William

Holland - an impoverished

baron but so good-looking! - pulled her against his chest, she did open her lips, and she did enjoy

the kiss. She even felt a little swooning feeling in her stomach. But it was nothing like the raw

emotion that had flooded her at the masked ball.

Now, three years later, she didn't remember the footman's face very well (for that was what she

had decided he was), but she definitely remembered her own reaction. And she'd grown rather

tolerant of herself. While it was true she probably shouldn't get married, given her lack of a

maidenhead, she had heard lots of stories about maidenheads that never existed, especially if one

was active and rode horses.

Perhaps she should take more interest in the whole process, now that her mother seemed to be

relinquishing control. Charlotte even found herself wondering whether Will Holland had found

the rich wife he needed.

Campion entered the dining room and removed her untouched consomme and gently placed a

half chicken, a *la diable*, before her.

Charlotte didn't like eating alone. It made her low, in fact. She liked painting alone: Her mother

had turned over a large room on the third floor, which had good light in the morning and

excellent light in the afternoon. She loved entering her studio, putting on her apron, and mixing

paints.

At the moment she was copying paintings. One after another, she took down paintings from all

over the ducal estates and carried them up to her room, keeping

them for a month or two, even

(in the case of the duke's only Rembrandt) for six months.

"Why, darling?" her mother had asked hopelessly that afternoon, looking at Charlotte's third copy

of their sturdy Elizabethan ancestor, Sir Vigilant Daicheston. Adelaide looked back and forth

between the two easels.

"Do you think his eyes are quite right, darling?" she asked. "He looks so - well, so piggy, in your

version."

Charlotte smiled back at her mother lovingly. "I know, Mama. I had a problem with his eyes, and

then I decided that it emphasized his corpulence rather well. He might have been a quite greedy

man, after all. He certainly managed to acquire a lot of possessions, didn't he?" "But why copies,

dearest? Why not make some more of your own pictures, perhaps some fruit? I love your fruit,

and the series of violets you did for Violetta's wedding were so splendid! I almost burst with

pride," the duchess said.

"I'll tell you what, Mama," said Charlotte. "As soon as I've finished with Sir Vigilant, I'll paint

you a really beautiful bunch of flowers for your room."

"Do you know what I'd like, Charlotte?" said her mother. "I would like you to paint a picture for

your great-aunt Margaret. It's getting quite difficult for her to leave her chambers now, and - I

know!" she said with great excitement. "When Margaret was young she was known as

Marguerite. I believe she was quite beautiful, and so everyone called her after the flower. You

can paint her a vase of marguerites, and I vow she'll be so

happy!" And so Adelaide bustled off to

find Campion and arrange for a boy to visit the flower market first thing tomorrow morning and

bring home loads of daisies.

"She's not done with Sir Vigilant yet," Adelaide confided in Campion. "But having marguerites

in the room will put her in the mood, so to speak. Who will you send? Fred? Well, Fred must be

sure to tell the flower stalls that we shall be wanting marguerites every morning for at least six to

eight weeks. You know how long it takes."

And indeed he did. The whole household revolved around the progress of Charlotte's paintings,

although she would have been amazed to realize it. When she began a new piece Charlotte

worked long hours and danced down the stairs, her face glowing. And when Charlotte danced,

the house danced.

She always noticed if a footman had a toothache, for example, and sent him back to the servants'

quarters immediately. She asked about the housekeeper Mrs. Simpkin's two nieces, who were

growing up a bit unruly; she never forgot to inquire kindly about Campion's only son, who had

been a chef-in-training over in France, but had to get out quickly when the Frenchies went crazy,

and now he was doing very well for himself, training over at the Maison Blanche on Thurston

Street.

But if a painting bogged down because a nose or an ear gained a misshapen air that didn't match

the original, then the house hummed rather than sang. Housemaids tiptoed past Charlotte's studio

on the third floor, and dust accumulated in the room because the servants never knew when she

would be found standing in front of an easel. Once an upstairs maid entered the room at eleven

o'clock at night to replace the candles, and accidentally walked in on Lady Charlotte, who sent

her away with a sharpish remark. After that Mrs. Simpkin and Campion monitored the progress

of pictures themselves, and regulated the household accordingly.

So Campion nodded sagely and smiled at his mistress. He'd take care of the marguerites first

thing, and Her Grace shouldn't worry about a thing, he murmured. And then he reminded the

duchess of her engagement at a fete de champagne. Adelaide dashed lightly up the stairs to get

dressed. She didn't think of asking Charlotte, and the duke was out at his club.

Charlotte sighed heavily. Campion swam silently into the room and removed her barely touched

chicken, suppressing his own sigh at the sight.

The Calverstill chef, Renoir, was wasted on the family, absolutely wasted. But Renoir would

never know. When the family dined alone Campion always removed the dishes himself, and they

invariably returned to the kitchen as if a rejoicing family of ten had surfeited themselves. It was

part of his campaign to keep Renoir happy, and he knew that the underfootmen, Fred and Cecil (a

ridiculous name for a footman), would never reveal that they too enjoyed duck a 'orange or poulet

a la diable of an evening.

Charlotte wandered back up to her bedchamber rather disconsolately. She could dress and follow

her mother to Lady Bridgeplate's fete, but it would look rather odd. And what if her mother had

gone on to another party, something she was quite capable of doing? Charlotte would arrive and

find herself without a chaperone, and Lord knows that would be bad for her reputation.

Her maid was down in the kitchens, so Charlotte pulled open the doors to her wardrobe and

looked at the array of gowns. She hadn't done much about her apparel lately. She realized it was

partly an act of pique, a way of telling her mother to leave her alone.

But now she gazed with dislike at her dresses. They weren't exactly out of fashion (her maid, if

no one else, would never let her wear something actually dated), but they weren't in the newest

style either. And perhaps even worse, they were all naive pastels, the soft buttery colors of

innocence and youth.

And I, Charlotte thought savagely, am not young! So why should I dress that way? She began

ruthlessly pulling out dresses and throwing them on the bed. When Marie entered the room some

ten minutes later, never expecting to find her mistress in her chambers, she was dumbfounded to

see piles of gowns on the bed, and her mistress gazing with a

satisfied expression at four or five

morning gowns left in her wardrobe.

"Mon dieu!" Marie breathed, wondering if Charlotte had suddenly gone mad. Her mistress, she

privately thought, was already as odd as could be. Perhaps she'd decided to join those nudists

who were emigrating to America! "Marie!" Charlotte said, without turning her head. "I've

decided to make a change. Tomorrow I shall go to Madame Brigitte's and order a whole new

wardrobe. Everything. From top to bottom."

Marie instantly grasped what was happening. Her mistress had finally woken up to the truth: A

woman needs a man. At least, that was what Marie had confided over and over to her beloved,

the second footman Cecil, when they were lying snug in Marie's room.

Campion and Mrs. Simpkin, the housekeeper, didn't know that, of course, but Marie's French

sensibilities did not require that she adhere to English morality. She and Cecil could not get

married until she had sufficient money for a dot, but until then she saw no reason to deny herself

or Cecil the pleasure of occasional company.

Marie's eyes brightened. "And your hair, my lady! Shall I summon Monsieur Pamplémousse?"

"Yes, Marie, that's a very good suggestion." Charlotte perched on top of the bed and looked into

the mirror over her dressing table, unthinkingly crushing four or five layers of delicate dresses.

She pulled her hair from its ribbon at her neck. "I think I shall have something entirely different .

. . perhaps I shall cut my hair!" "Oh, Lady Charlotte, I'm not

certain," said Marie, thinking of the

beauty of her mistress's silky black curls as they dried before the fire. "Men like such things, long

hair," she said, her Gallic accent pronounced. Marie's parents had immigrated from France some

ten years ago, when she was just a girl, but she tended to slide into a thick French lisp in

moments of excitement.

"This short hair . . . well, it's very new, isn't it? Lady Marion Carolly cut all hers off, of course,

and Pearl Clotswild, the American heiress, and . . ." Marie's voice trailed off. She was an avid

reader of the gossip columns, and she knew that cropped hair was one of the most daring things a

young lady could do.

Marie came around the bed and pulled Charlotte's heavy black hair off her shoulders. Together

they stared into the mirror over her dressing table, Marie's tiny face gazing intently, her lips

pursed. She twisted Charlotte's hair this way and that.

"Perhaps," she said finally. It was true that Charlotte's face sprang into high relief when it

escaped from its mantle of hair. In the three years since Marie had become Charlotte's maid, her

mistress had never let her spend more than ten minutes arranging her hair, and so Marie had

finally taken desperately to threading a simple ribbon through the front, which at least held most

of the weight off Charlotte's face. But the style didn't emphasize Charlotte's eyes. Now she saw

they were a remarkable size, slightly almond shaped, and her eyelashes were as black as her hair.

"We shall see what monsieur says," Marie announced. She had

the greatest reverence for

Monsieur Pample-mousse, about whom one heard the most riveting stories: He was the

hairdresser to Louis XVI, he had escaped from the very shadow of Madame Guillotine, he was

the hairdresser to Napoleon's beloved Josephine. Of course the English all abhorred Napoleon,

but Marie reserved judgment. To her mind, Josephine was a model of feminine beauty and

fashion, and her husband of rather less account.

"And as for Madame Brigitte's, my lady," Marie said earnestly, "had you thought of perhaps

visiting the establishment of Madame Careme? Madame Brigitte creates perfect dresses for

young girls, but . . ."

"You are right, of course," Charlotte said, her voice rather bleak. She was not, and would never

again be, a "girl."

She met her maid's worried eyes with a brilliant smile. "Actually, Marie, I never was much good

at the girlish look anyway. It is time to try another style. I saw a woman in the park yesterday in

one of those new high-waisted dresses, and no corset. Of course," she said, "I think the lady

herself was probably not of the highest moral fiber, but the point is that the new French styles are

rather charming, don't you think?" Marie clapped her hands. "Oh, yes, Lady Charlotte! Madame

Careme is just the person to visit. And," she said shrewdly, "you have just the figure to neglect

the corset. Perhaps . . . you might order one gown in gold? I have often thought that you would

look splendid in a dress the color of the morning-room curtains!"

Charlotte was startled for a

moment, and then smiled. "I shall wear no more pink," she said. "Nothing rosier than a strong peach.

And" - more slowly - "no flounces, no ruffles, no embroidered flowers, no bows."

"Absolument, oui, out!" Marie was almost babbling.

Charlotte looked up, smiling. "Now, Marie, would you like to take all these dresses away?"

Marie's eyes shone. Not that she would ever wear such outmoded clothes herself, but she could

sell them for a tidy sum (in perfect condition as they were!) and she and Cecil would be that

much closer to marriage.

"Thank you, my lady," she said, sweeping Charlotte a graceful curtsy. Marie flung a huge stack

over her arm and half-staggered out of the room, blinded by underskirts puffing into her face. It

took three trips and then Charlotte had the room to herself again.

She paced about, frowning slightly. Then she began to take down the china figures on the mantel,

and all the knickknacks that had sat on her bedside table since she was five years old, and to

place them carefully on her dressing table. The room was still too frothy. It was a girl's room, for

a girl's dreams, all buttercups and daisies.

It will have to be changed, Charlotte thought, but I can do that tomorrow. She envisioned

something cooler, perhaps even blue, the color of cornflowers. She had retained a horror of blue,

based on memories of her coming out ball, but that was foolishness.

Charlotte went to bed without a thought for the almost-finished

third version of Sir Vigilant

Daicheston, waiting on the third floor.

Instead, she went to sleep thinking dreamily about herself, dreams in which she was dancing with

a man who had silver-shot hair, and she was wearing a silk gown of Persian blue, and he was

gazing at her in adoration, desire stark in his eyes.

He bent his head and his lips brushed against hers, once, twice, three times, inviting, beckoning,

promising. Charlotte turned restlessly in her sleep and woke up, her heart pounding. She stared

into the dark for quite a while, thinking. Tomorrow morning she would definitely inquire

whether William Holland had found himself a wife. It's rather odd, Charlotte thought amusedly,

to join the ranks of husband-seeking women so late. But it didn't strike her as an insurmountable

task by any means. All she had to find were brains, given her new wealth. Brains, and something

unnameable, Charlotte thought. Whatever that footman had. With a sigh she snuggled back into

her covers and went to sleep.

No one greeted Charlotte's determination to buy a new wardrobe with more joy than her

mother. They visited Madame Careme together, the very next day, and while Charlotte

recklessly ordered dozens of wispy, high-waisted dresses, so light that the outline of her entire

body could be seen through them, Adelaide watched happily from a comfortable chair.

In turn, Madame Careme was ecstatic. In Charlotte she saw a young lady with an exquisite figure

and perfect bones. Her dresses would dance out of the shop after

this particular duke's daughter

appeared at a few balls wearing her creations. Adelaide's eyes twinkled when she heard the price

of a particularly elegant gown that Charlotte was considering. She estimated the price to be rather

less than half the going rate, but madame was shrewdly correct to reduce the price, she thought.

Without a corset, her daughter's body was revealed to have developed natural, luxurious curves.

Men would swoon when they saw the way her breasts smoothly rose out of Madame Careme's

tiny bodices, looking perfectly shaped and utterly unrestrained. Women would order the same

gown, hoping to duplicate the effect.

"She won't lose the top of that dress, will she?" Adelaide asked with some anxiety.

Charlotte was standing in front of a three-sided mirror, wearing a startling gown. It was stark

white and its only ornamentation were six or seven narrow black ribbons falling straight down

the skirt, which seemed endless as it began just under Charlotte's breasts.

And there was practically no top at all, Adelaide thought, wondering what Marcel would think

when he saw the gown. It was the most starkly fashionable dress Adelaide had ever seen.

She cleared her throat. "Charlotte," she said. "You must have it. You will start a new fashion."

Charlotte turned around. "Oh, yes," she said happily. "I shall have it, thank you, madame." And

madame smiled, and ferociously beckoned to a girl hovering in the corner with another creation

reverently laid over her arms.

At forty-one, Adelaide considered herself far too old for the new fashions, but even she was

talked into buying just a few morning dresses: pale, delicate gowns with the so-fashionable

Greek key pattern embroidered at the hem. They are constructed, madame whispered

confidentially, so that one might wear a light waist corset with them, should one desire. And

Adelaide did so desire. Not for her, this naked look that Charlotte was taking up so quickly! Still

. . . Adelaide smiled, thinking with satisfaction of the cattish remarks that some dowagers had

made to her recently about her youngest daughter being likely to "stay on her hands," and "never

fall off the shelf." Nonsense. No one, she thought, looking at Charlotte's long slender legs and

lily-white skin, would ever murmur to her again about Charlotte being long in the tooth. Not in

these clothes! That afternoon Monsieur Pamplémousse arrived and before Charlotte had time to

think about it, her long hair was lying in little sheaves around her dressing-room chair.

"Regarded" said Monsieur Pamplémousse excitedly. "You are an Incomparable!" He kissed his

fingers. "Ah, my scissors are made of gold!" Charlotte stared at herself in the mirror. Her hair

was curling in artful abandonment and her head felt light, as if it were a balloon about to float

away. Freed from all the hair, her lips looked larger and her cheekbones were immense.

"Lady Charlotte," said Marie earnestly. "You look more beautiful than I have ever seen you. You

will start a rage!" Charlotte smiled back at her in the mirror. Monsieur Pamplémousse was

fussing about, showing Marie how to adjust a band around her mistress's head, if she would like,

although - he pulled himself up importantly.

"Lady Charlotte must summon me for any important occasion."
He was fully engaged for the

following day, for the Duke of Clarence's ball, but he would make a special exception and arrive

at Calverstill House at four o'clock.

"I do not wish my creation to be marred," he said, with a tremendous frown at Marie. Marie

quailed and broke into French protests that Monsieur Pamplémousse ignored, flapping his hands

at her.

"I must go, I must go!" he said in his marked accent.

Charlotte smiled to herself. It hadn't escaped her that Monsieur Pamplémousse didn't respond to

Marie in French; in fact, although he dropped foreign words into his speech, they were not all

French. He seemed to be using Italian as well. She looked at herself again. It didn't matter

whether he was from the South Pole: He did have scissors of gold. She - Charlotte - felt

beautiful, really beautiful, for the first time. To be honest, she felt exuberant. She was beautiful,

and desirable, and exquisitely dressed. Why should she feel any shame? She couldn't wait for the

Duke of Clarence's ball! And that was why when Alexander McDonough Foakes, the new Earl of

Sheffield and Downes, stopped in at his club on his very first evening back in London after three

years in Italy, all anyone seemed to be talking about was a delectable heiress named Charlotte.

Two gawky boys were practically threatening to duel each other

over the question of which of

them she had liked the best; his old friend Braddon Chatwin looked miserable when she was

mentioned. In the two weeks since Charlotte appeared at the Duke of Clarence's ball, the male

half of London had fallen hopelessly in love with her.

Alex and Braddon settled down together in a quiet corner of the library, legs stretched out before

a warm fire. Alexander fingered his brandy, listening absentmindedly to Braddon's tale of woe . .

. he'd asked her to marry him; she'd said no; last night she danced twice with . . . Lord! Why

didn't he remember how boring all of this was! He didn't care who this arrogant little snip danced

with. He looked at Braddon darkly.

"Cut rope, Braddon," he drawled. "She must be a complete twit. Who would turn down an earl?

It's not as if you have seventeen children or something."

"What do you know about it, Alex?" Braddon said hotly. "You always have luck with women. ..."

But he trailed off uncomfortably.

Suddenly Braddon remembered something awful, something he'd forgotten in the excitement of

seeing his old friend stride into the club after three years.

Alex didn't seem to have noticed his pause, Braddon thought, stealing a peek over his brandy

snifter. His heart quieted down. Alex looked just the same. He didn't limp or anything. Braddon

shuddered slightly and took a huge gulp of brandy. What would Alex do with his time now?

Why, all gentlemen did was box, and bet, and - and wench. Alex never liked gambling, and now

he couldn't wench, apparently.

He cleared his throat. "Ah, so, are you back for good?" Braddon asked.

"Yes," Alex said absentmindedly, not even looking up from his glass. "You know, my father died

eight months ago, and I couldn't come back just then, but now I ... Well, the estate takes some

running, and - " He looked up and fixed Braddon with his disconcerting black eyes. "I missed

England after a while. Italy is splendid, but Maria, my wife, died and so I decided to return."

"But ..." Braddon was bamboozled. "I thought . . . everyone thinks that you aren't married, that

Maria, ah, annulled your marriage."

Alex looked up, his eyes dark. "She did," he said briefly. "She remarried, and then she died. Of

scarlet fever, a month ago."

"So you, you stayed in touch?" Braddon hazarded.

"No. But she summoned me when she was dying." Alex looked up again, and caught Braddon's

gaping expression. Poor old Braddon! He always was a slowtop.

"Enough of this!" Alex said, tossing off his brandy. "Didn't you say there's some sort of a ball

tonight?" "Yes," Braddon said, "but you can't go like that! You're not even dressed." He cast an

accusing look at his friend's buckskin pantaloons. "Besides," he blurted, "why on earth would you

want to go? You always hated those things, even before - " And he caught himself again.

"I plan to attend the ball for the same reason you will, Braddon," Alex said gently. "I need a

wife." He stood up and hauled the silent earl to his feet. They stood, eye-to-eye, in the empty

library.

"Why?" Braddon asked bluntly.

Alexander turned and strolled toward the door. "I have a daughter," he threw back over his

shoulder. "She needs a mother. Come on, Slaslow. I've got my coach outside; we'll stop by my

house and I'll change and we can have some dinner. Then we'll go find ourselves wives."

Braddon followed him dumbly. He had a daughter? Everyone in London knew that his wife had

annulled the marriage on the grounds of impotency. And that Alex hadn't contested it. He'd

never find a wife. Well of course he would, Braddon thought. Plenty of women wanting to

marry Earls; he could attest to that himself. He just didn't understand, he just didn't. If Alex was

impotent, how did he have a daughter? And if he had a daughter, why was his marriage

annulled? And if . . . Braddon's head was reeling.

The carriage pulled up in front of Sheffield House. Black swags still hung on each window,

although they were getting a bit jaded now, eight months after Alex's father died. Braddon

trotted after Alex, thinking furiously. He couldn't work it out, and he couldn't get it straight

without asking about the impotency business, and he wouldn't do that, not under any

circumstances.

It did cross his mind that it might be a little sticky, bringing Alex around to Lady Prestlefield's

bail. She was an awfully high stickler for morals and things like that; why, she'd barred Lady

Gwenth Manisse from entering her house one day, just because poor Lady Gwenth was so

disastrously and famously in love with a married archbishop. But then, Alex was an earl. And

what's more, he wasn't divorced, exactly, and how could you turn someone away from a dance

because they were - disabled, so to speak? Which brought Braddon around again to wondering

about the problem of the daughter. Where did that daughter come from? He'd better just forget it,

Braddon thought finally, and pretend that he knew nothing about the whole annulment business.

His head was aching trying to think it out. He'd get one of his clever friends, like David, to

explain the whole thing to him later. If he just remembered not to mention any women, even that

luscious little singer he'd just met at the opera, there wouldn't be any uneasiness at dinner. Well,

particularly he must forget the singer, because she was Italian, or she said she was. Braddon

brightened. Horses were obviously the trick! Nothing risky in talking about horses.

Braddon always had a remarkable ability for putting things out of his head (to the great

annoyance of his mama, his tutors, and every logical person who came in contact with him,

especially his personal secretary, his estate manager, and his butler). And so he thoroughly

enjoyed his meal, and had no idea how much he bored Alex by giving him a point-by-point

description of each and every horse in his stables.

After dinner Alex excused himself and ran upstairs to get changed. But first he walked softly into

the chamber adjoining his and tiptoed over to the crib. Nestled into the sheets, his daughter was

curled on her side, her face resting on one hand, the other flung

above her head. She looked so

angelic asleep, not at all like the demon who had turned his life upside down in the last month.

He reached out and traced the shape of her arching eyebrows: his eyebrows. His heart thumped

again with rage. How could Maria have kept her from him? He'd lost a whole year of Pippa's life.

Alex took a deep breath and pulled the sheets snugly up around her small round body.

In her sleep, Pippa didn't look sad; she was smiling faintly. She never had the nightmares the

doctor forecast. It was only when she was awake that the loss of her mother showed. Damn you,

Maria, Alex thought fiercely. If he'd known . . . well, Maria would still have died, wouldn't she?

Someday Pippa would stop missing her mother. At least Maria had summoned him when she

knew she wouldn't live. And now Pippa was here, and safe. He bent down and kissed her

forehead.

"Don't worry, pumpkin," he said softly. "I'll be back by the time you wake up."

They arrived at Prestlefield House just a little after eleven o'clock, when the ball was in full

swing. Braddon's fears regarding Alex's reception were for naught because Lady Prestlefield had

just closed the receiving line when they entered the house and by the time they reached the

ballroom she was energetically swinging through a country dance.

The Prestlefield butler's chest swelled out a bit with pride as he ushered in not one, but two earls.

His voice boomed over the crowded ballroom: "The Earl of Sheffield and Downes, and the Earl

of Slaslow."

There was no pause in the chattering noise that filled the room like an aviary. But everyone's eyes

darted up the steps and saw the two young men descending into the room; and everyone's

thoughts flew to tales they'd heard from Italy; and they all bent their heads a little closer to their

partners, or longed agonizingly for the end of the dance so they could seek out better, more

informed companions.

Charlotte didn't even hear the announcement, because she was busy being gloriously indiscreet

on the balcony. In the month or so since she had unveiled her new wardrobe, she'd found that

looking gorgeous made her feel gorgeous, and feeling gorgeous translated into feeling daring. In

fact, she'd rather given up the idea of finding a husband. She was having too much fun just

flirting.

At the moment she was leaning back against the balcony, smiling up at Lord Holland. His eyes

were sparkling, looking back at her.

He was standing in front of her, just a fraction of an inch from her thigh, and she knew he was

doing it on purpose. He put his hands on the balcony railing on either side of her. Charlotte

tapped his chest with her fan.

"Ho, ho, sir," she said. "Not too close."

"What am I doing?" Will complained. "I'm not even touching your sleeve." He leaned a trifle

closer.

"I think you have an insect on your face," he said seriously, with just a tiny quirk at the side of his

lips.

"Oh?" Charlotte said. "What kind of insect?" "A bee," he breathed, very close to her lips now.

"Do you want me to kill it?" "I'm not sure," she said, smiling.

"Think of it this way," he said. "Your lips are honey and mine are the bee - " But wherever that

rather strained metaphor was going, it was rudely broken off by Lady Sophie York, the daughter

of the Marquis of Brandenburg.

"Charlotte!" she said, elbowing Lord Holland to the side. "Your mother is coming across the

ballroom as if she were parting the Red Sea. You'd better go back inside and draw her fire; I'll

stay with Will for a minute and you pretend you were just taking air."

Charlotte grimaced. She said, "Thank you, Sophie!" and slipped past Will's shoulder through the

curtain, without even a farewell glance.

Sophie looked up at Will, her eyes wide and innocent. Even though he felt a little cross, he had to

smile back. She was such a perfect little person - probably not much over five feet tall, and

delectably shaped.

"Oh, Will," Sophie said mournfully. "Don't tell me that Charlotte's lips are as honey-sweet as

mine. . . ." She looked utterly dejected.

Will looked at her suspiciously. He knew Sophie York by now. "Well, you know how it is,

Sophie. I did adore you, but then I saw Charlotte and she's so tall, so willowy and statuesque, and

somehow small girls just faded - " He stopped suddenly as a small fist punched into his stomach.

"Come on, Sophie! Give over!" he demanded, pulling a fragrant

armful into the crook of his right

arm.

"Your lips," he said, looking deeply into her eyes, "are sweeter than honey grown by Tasmanian

bees."

She gurgled with laughter. "Are you sure I'm not the bee, Will? I did sting you, didn't I?"

"Tasmanian bees in the Alps," Will insisted, laughing back. He was thinking how much he liked

these new French dresses. Sophie might be small, but her body was perfectly rounded, and he

liked having her pressed against his side. His eyes darkened.

"Oh, no you don't, Will," Sophie said, seeing his intent. She nimbly turned out of his arms and

pushed the heavy brocade curtain aside. "We had our kiss in Kensington, remember? Oh, surely

you didn't forget, Will?" She pouted slightly, her eyes glinting. Will's groin tightened. He didn't

think he'd ever meet such an alluring pair of women as Charlotte and Sophie, this side of the

demimonde, that is. Sophie twinkled at him, and slipped into the ballroom.

Lord Holland stood for a moment, braced against the balcony. If Charlotte and Sophie were so

lovely, why did they jointly make him feel like such an idiot? And more important, how was he

going to get one of them to marry him? He knew in the pit of his stomach that he had to have one

of these girls. Even if they had been poor. But luckily they weren't, he remembered cheerfully.

Sophie paused on the other side of the balcony curtain. Charlotte was just to her left, talking to

her mama and a group of dowagers.

Sophie smiled. Charlotte needed rescuing again. She drifted gracefully toward the group.

"Charlotte," she said in dulcet tones.

"Excuse me, Mama," replied her friend, turning gratefully toward Sophie.

"I feel a trifle deshabelle," Sophie complained, waving her fan before her perfectly arranged hair.

"It's so hot in here, don't you think, Your Grace?" She smiled at Charlotte's mother.

Adelaide smiled back in spite of herself. Sophie's smile was entrancing, even though Adelaide

wasn't entirely pleased with Charlotte's new friendship. She wasn't quite sure why. Sophie was

perhaps a trifle wild, but everyone knew that she would never really step beyond the bounds of

propriety. It was just that she seemed so unlike her serious, nonfrivolous daughter. But then, what

was her daughter like? In the last few weeks Charlotte had become the toast of London. From

being someone who had received eight offers of marriage in three years, she received more than

that last week alone.

"Oh, Sophie," Charlotte laughingly chided. "You shouldn't say you feel deshabelle: That

means you're only half dressed, doesn't it, Mama?" Adelaide nodded. That comment was just the

kind of thing that made her wonder about Lady Sophie. She knew for a fact that Sophie's French

was flawless, given that her mother was French and she had a French nanny. Whatever was

the girl doing, suggesting she felt undressed? Really! Her sense of humor ... it was a little outre, a

little improper.

And Charlotte and Sophie went everywhere together now. The sight of Charlotte's shining black

curls bent close to Sophie's strawberry-blond locks was common in Hyde Park; even more

astonishing, Charlotte was actually painting Sophie: her first life portrait. Perhaps I am a little

jealous, Adelaide thought.

Suddenly she started. "Oh, no!" Adelaide half-shrieked. "Wax!" The little gaggle of women

jumped back, looking up. Sure enough, they were standing directly under a chandelier, and hot

wax was dripping from the candles.

"Charlotte," Adelaide commanded. "And Sophie, of course," she added. "We shall retire for a

moment. Come, girls." And she plowed imperiously through the crowds, heading for the ladies'

retiring room.

Sophie and Charlotte followed, rather more slowly. Sure enough, Adelaide did have a white

waxy streak down the back of her gown.

She would probably have to remove the gown and let the maids iron off the wax.

Charlotte's eyes were glowing. She was wearing one of her new gowns, made of dark green silk.

She loved the way the fabric slid smoothly over her legs as she danced or walked.

"So, are your lips made of honey?" Sophie whispered to her as they walked along,

automatically returning smiles and salutes.

"And is that a honeybee you left back there on the balcony?" "Oh, no," Charlotte wailed in mock

despair. "Don't tell me that you are going to ruin another perfectly good flirtation! I liked that

honeybee story!" "I am not!" Sophie replied. "I thought Will was a lovely honeybee. And," she

said with some indignation, "it's not fair to suggest that I ruined your flirtation with Reginald last

week - all I did was ask how many times he adjusted his toupee while you were sitting out the

dance with him. I am right, you know! It's a perfect indicator of desire. When his wife has a

headache she'll learn to dread his fidgeting with his wig."

Charlotte laughed at her, half shocked, half delighted. How could Sophie say such outrageous

things? "I suppose," Charlotte replied, "that his hands are constantly on his head whenever you sit

out a dance with him!" "Naturally," Sophie drawled. "I should consider myself in very poor form

if he didn't jiggle his wig at least every other minute. And you know," she said more reflectively,

"maybe one of us should take him up seriously. He's not at all bad-looking."

They wove their way up the stairs, a laborious task given the throngs of gossipers positioned

halfway up, still thinking about Sir Reginald Petersham.

"Of course, he's only a baronet," Sophie said.

"But he has a lovely forehead," Charlotte replied. Sir Reginald was blessed with a long, thin face,

the kind she would quite like to paint, now that she'd graduated to painting real people. Still, she

couldn't paint him without marrying him; unmarried ladies did not spend hours in a room alone

with a man, even if he was posed on the couch and not allowed to move. And she didn't like his

forehead enough to marry him for it.

"I don't know," Charlotte said with a sigh. "One could burn all his

little hair attachments. I like

bald heads. But . . ."

"Do you know who he'd be perfect for?" Sophie said suddenly.
"Your friend Julia!" "Oh, Sophie!

Julia's married!" Julia had made a very good marriage, in her first year. Charlotte still couldn't

think about that season without feeling faint pangs of humiliation. While Charlotte sat out dances

at the side of the ballroom, Julia energetically bounced her way into the heart of a red-coated

major. They currently lived in Gibraltar.

"Why Julia in particular?" she asked.

"Because Reginald loves to listen; haven't you noticed? He likes the two of us not just because

we're beautiful but because we talk.

And Julia: Well, she talks more than both of us put together, doesn't she?" Charlotte giggled. It

was true that Julia could carry on a conversation with a brick wall. But Sophie had shocked her

again. True, Charlotte thought that she looked well, and she knew that Sophie was beautiful, but

to refer to it so carelessly . . . there was something uncivilized about Sophie York. She was so

observant - and she never hesitated to voice her opinion, no matter how indelicate that opinion

was.

By now they had reached the upper floor, and crowded after Adelaide into the ladies' parlor. Sure

enough, Adelaide was turning her back to a maid, who had begun painstakingly unbuttoning the

gilt buttons on her back. Charlotte groaned inside. They'd be here for hours! Just then her mama

looked up and caught her eye. "Girls, will you help me, please?

Sophie, if you would sit here and

hold my bag, I would be very grateful." Sophie sat down with Adelaide's delicate little French

reticule on her lap. There had been a rash of burglaries at ton parties lately, and Adelaide was not

going to risk losing her favorite bag.

"And, Charlotte, my dear, would you mind slipping downstairs and telling Sissy where I am? I

told her mama that I would keep an eye on her, and I don't want her going into supper with just

anyone. Prudence will be furious if that John Mason takes Sissy in to supper again."

"Yes, Mama," said Charlotte dutifully but not enthusiastically. Sissy, or Miss Cecilia

Commonweal, was a problem; no one particularly liked her, and she had dreadful taste in men.

Given a room full of eligible bachelors, she would unerringly single out the only impoverished

second son. And since Sissy's mother, who was a school friend of Adelaide's, had a weak heart

and didn't attend many balls, Charlotte had spent rather too many dinners with a sullen Sissy,

recently rescued from the attentions of yet another ineligible man.

Charlotte began to make her way down the staircase, struggling to see whether she could glimpse

Sissy by looking over people's shoulders. She didn't seem to be in the ballroom. She's probably

kissing someone on a balcony, Charlotte thought scornfully, forgetting that she herself had

almost done precisely that just ten minutes before.

Toward the bottom of the staircase she suddenly thought she spied Sissy's plumes. Sissy had

taken to wearing an elaborate set of three or four dyed ostrich feathers pinned to the back of her

hair that made her a little easier to spot in a crowd. Charlotte privately thought the hairstyle was

dreadful, like the nodding plumes on one of the queen's guard horses.

She was on tiptoe just three or four steps from the bottom, straining to see where those gaudy

plumes had gone, when her right foot slipped out from under her, striking the person at the

bottom of the stairs squarely in the lower back.

"Ooof!" he said, and thump! went Charlotte's bottom against the marble step. Tears came to her

eyes as her back hit the marble stair riser.

The person she had struck turned around and squatted before her. Charlotte raised her eyes. She

began to say, "I'm so sorry," but the words failed in her mouth.

He was larger than she remembered, and handsomer. His thighs strained through his thin

pantaloons; she didn't remember his having such wide shoulders. But his eyes were precisely as

velvety dark as she had remembered, and his hair was the same black-silver curls, falling over his

forehead in the French manner. Monsieur Pamplemousse would approve, Charlotte thought

idiotically.

Suddenly Charlotte realized she was staring. Her eyes flew to his and she turned faintly rosy. The

man was staring back at her, his eyebrows slightly furrowed. Charlotte tried to think of

something to say. Finally she blurted, "What are you doing here?" Instantly she felt acutely

stupid. Of course he wasn't a footman! He was wearing formal

dress, and besides, how could she

have ever thought such a thing? He had an undeniable air of command and gentlemanly breeding.

His winged eyebrows flew up. "Where else should I be?" the man asked, still balancing on his

heels.

Charlotte blushed again. "Oh, you know, at a masked ball," she said vaguely. "This time

knocked you over," she added.

Alex frowned again. What on earth was this beautiful girl talking about? Just his luck: He'd met

the first interesting woman of the whole evening, and she was around the bend. His glance

drifted down. From here, he could see straight into her gown. She had the most beautiful, creamy

breasts he'd ever seen. They were lavishly round, and soft, and perfectly shaped. His hand

actually twitched. My God! He'd almost touched her right here. Suddenly he became aware of

piping little voices around them, enquiring about injuries and calling for help.

He reached out a hand and brought her to her feet.

"Is your back all right?" Alex asked, ignoring her nonsensical comment about masked balls. Now

he liked her even more. She was just the right height, tall, and when she raised her head her

mouth was kissably close to his. Alex drew her over to the side of the hall and without even

thinking, reached out to rub the middle of her back where she must have struck the stairs.

His hand instantly stopped. Her gown was so thin he could feel the rising swell of her bottom,

and he was rocked by one of the most powerful surges of lust he

had ever felt. He must be losing

his mind, Alex decided. It had been too long since he had a woman.

Charlotte didn't even feel his hand on her back, or notice when he snatched it away. "Did you ...

do you remember me?" she asked, finally, looking straight into his eyes.

Alex frowned again. He'd never met her, that was certain. He looked at her carefully. She had a

delectable, triangular face enveloped in soft curls: a perfect straight nose, and high cheekbones.

Her mouth was a natural dark red. Her eyebrows were exquisite: high and winged, a woman's

version of his own. For a second, some memory stirred, but . . .

"I've never met you," Alex said, smiling at her. He wouldn't forget meeting a woman as beautiful

as this.

Charlotte's mouth fell open slightly. He took someone's virginity, and he didn't even remember?

What were men, anyway? Did he do that every week? Alex took her arm again and led her

toward the parlor to the right.

"You must have met my brother," he said. "We're twins." He looked down at her and smiled.

"You are not the first to mistake the two of us."

Charlotte smiled back without thinking, and her heart gave a huge thump. "You are a twin?" she

repeated. Her mind seemed to have gone numb.

"Yes," Alex said cheerfully, having figured out the whole problem. The girl wasn't insane; she

was just thinking of Patrick. "Even our mother couldn't always tell us apart."

Charlotte looked up at him. She knew exactly who he was - well,

she didn't know who he was,
but she knew that he was me one.

She even recognized the dimple in his right cheek and the shape of his lips. But he didn't seem to

be pretending; he genuinely didn't remember meeting her. Charlotte's heart sunk. Her virginity

had mattered so little that he didn't even remember taking it.

Her steps slowed. Where were they going, anyway? She had to get back upstairs, to her mother.

She calmly took her arm out of his grasp and brought them to a halt.

"Thank you so much for helping me up, sir," she said softly. "I apologize for knocking you to the

floor." Without waiting for his reply she turned and almost - not quite - dashed up the stairs.

Alex stood dumbfounded. One minute she was there; the next minute she was gone. He looked

after her wildly. Who was she? Suddenly he heard an anxious voice at his ear and turned to see

Braddon. "What do you think?" Braddon asked. "Isn't she devastating?" "Oh, yes," Alex said,

grasping the whole situation in mere seconds. "I'm going to marry her. What did you say her

name was?" When Charlotte reappeared from the ladies' salon she was swept into a crowd of

laughing, reproachful dance partners whom she had neglected while attending her mother. Alex

watched her fending off their imploring gestures for a minute or so. My God, he thought, she is

beautiful.

Charlotte's color was high. She knew the minute he entered the room. Knowing that he was

watching made her feel hot and tremblingly excited. Now she

could feel his large hand, just

touching her bottom as he rubbed the bruise on her back. She may not have noticed at the time,

but now she felt as if her flesh were burning. Thinking of his touch brought on a flood of

memories. She was filled with longing to feel his hands on her again, all over her, the way he had

touched her three years ago. But at the same time, Charlotte felt punishing humiliation. He had

simply forgotten the whole encounter. He didn't even notice who was in his arms that night. She

could hardly think, torn between rage and desire, although none of the men surrounding her

noticed her lack of attentiveness.

Thinking of the garden, Charlotte smiled at Will Holland so suggestively that he immediately

dismissed all thought of marrying Sophie York. Charlotte was the one. He bent over her hand,

beseeking her to allow him to take her into supper. Or - he looked at her wickedly - dance with

him once more? They had already danced twice; a third dance would be akin to announcing an

engagement. Charlotte laughed and shook her head reprovingly.

If Charlotte couldn't dismiss the gardens of Stuart Hall from her mind, Alex had no thought of his

long-ago encounter with a young prostitute as he watched the lovely daughter of a duke joust

with her suitors. His memories of the garden, in fact, were keen: the woman's long, silky hair and

skin so white that her hair had to be red, the shape of her small breasts, upturned like champagne

glasses, her soft, dusky eyes. But Charlotte had short black curls, eyes that sparkled with life and

intelligence, and breasts that made you ache just to see their generous outlines. There was no

similarity between memory and the duke's daughter, even if the possibility had occurred to him.

Suddenly Alex felt like a cloddish boy, standing by the wall, lusting after the reigning belle of

London society. He pushed himself disgustedly into an upright position and turned on his heel.

He knew where the Duke of Calverstill lived; why bother contending with the swarm of gnats

surrounding the duke's daughter? Alex rooted a protesting Braddon out of the gaming room and

summoned his coach. By the end of an evening spent gambling at Brooks's, Alex was some six

hundred pounds richer.

By three o'clock in the morning the candles were burning down in what Brooks called the Velvet

Room. The room was hung in swathes of dark green velvet, designed to make day seem like

night, to make the gamblers feel enclosed in a timeless space. But Alex had won a great deal of

money, and although most of the gamblers would keep going until dawn, he was tired and a little

bored.

His eyes nicked about the room. It was filled with aristocrats lounging in the armchairs that

surrounded four gambling tables. Only the servant who was replenishing the wall chandeliers

looked as crisp as he had at five o'clock when the doors of the club opened.

The gamblers had loosened their elaborately tied cravats, or torn them off in pure frustration.

They looked untidy and exhausted, feverishly throwing dice or clutching their cards.

"Well, my lord," said a drawling, heavily accented voice from the other side of the table. "You

have done extremely well tonight."

Alex swung his head around and calmly met the eyes of Lucien Boch, a French marquis living in

England. Boch had gambled outrageously, and lost.

Boch leaned forward, his hands squarely set on the green felt lining of the table reserved for the

card game ombre. "You are so ...

lucky" he said in a soft, poisonous tone. Alex looked at him. Ombre was a game of skill, not

luck. Boch had played carelessly.

"I trust, monsieur" Alex said evenly, "that you meant nothing by your comment. I would

willingly grant that my winnings are the result of - luck."

There was a small silence. Boch's eyes burned with rage; he could hardly breathe he was so

angry. His lip curled. "Ah, my lord," he finally said in response. "I would take my luck at cards

any day over yours ... at love." The room had grown relatively quiet. Three of the four tables had

fallen perfectly still, the players listening intently. Everyone knew that the sons of the late Earl of

Sheffield and Downes had been sent out of England due to their propensity to settle arguments

with their fists. Alexander seemed to have matured, but could any man allow an insult of this

nature to pass unnoticed? Alex's heart didn't even skip a beat. He had grown used to gutter insults

in the year following his annulment. Still, he had thought to leave them behind, in Italy. Alex

squarely put both his hands down on the table's green surface, leaning forward slightly. The two

men were face-to-face, parted only by a small space. He smiled.

"Perhaps, monsieur," Alex said softly, "you are jealous of my success with women, and that is

why you risk your life?" Lucien stared back at Alex. He felt sick; he had done a terrible thing.

Swept into the heat of gambling, he had thrown down a jewel that he kept always near his heart.

It was the ring given him by his wife at their marriage.

"My lord," he said hoarsely, ignoring Alex's threat, which hung over the entire room. "I am a

fool, because I lost to you my wife's ring. And she is ... is no longer here, and I must have it back.

Will you play me again?" Alex drew back. Boch's eyes were desperate, black. Alex put a hand in

his pocket and pulled out a delicately chased ring, graced with a sapphire.

"What does it say?" he asked, turning it over in the candlelight. The ring's sapphire caught the

candles and flung back their light. It must be worth a thousand pounds, he thought.

"Toujours a moi," said Boch quietly.

"Forever mine," Alex translated. He suddenly realized that the entire room was dead silent. He

looked keenly at Boch, whom he had just met that night. "How long have you been in this

country?" Boch swallowed hard. "Eight years, my lord."

His marchioness, Alex thought, did not accompany him. She must have fallen under the

guillotine. He tossed the ring in the air, caught it, and placed it gently in front of Boch. "There,

man, take it." He swept up the remainder of his winnings as a wave of male voices hit the air, and

turned to go.

A hand stopped him. It was Boch, who had come around the table and stood before him, slim,

tall, and dressed in black. "My lord," he said slowly. "I am a fool who is in your debt for life. But

while I am stupid, I do not lack money. Please, let me buy the ring from you."

Alex realized Boch was not as young as he thought, probably around his own age, in fact. "I will

not," he said briefly. Boch stood ramrod stiff before him. Oh, Lord, Alex thought. French pride.

He quite liked the man too. "Care to join me for a brandy?" he asked.

Boch's lips tightened and then relaxed. "All right, my lord," he said, sighing. "I gather that fools

cannot buy themselves out of their idiocy."

Settled in the library with coffee laced generously with brandy, the two men did not mention

love, rings, or wives, but talked amiably of the latest debates in the House of Lords. As an exiled

Frenchman, Boch naturally had no part in government but he took a keen interest, particularly

given the threatened grain riots.

"I am wondering," he said, "whether we could have prevented the revolution in France. If we had

had grain machines, such as you are beginning to use here, could it have prevented the rage of the

peasants?" "But my understanding," Alex said delicately, "is that grain was not scarce, but the

peasants were not allowed to eat any. In other words, that food was being hoarded by the very

rich."

"Yes, that is true," Lucien said in a brooding voice. "I told my father. ..." His voice trailed off.

"We grew complacent, and that is a great sin. My brother, in particular, understood the danger.

He bought land in England." Lucien looked up. "That is why I am not destitute, like the majority

of my countrymen living in England. He was very intelligent, my brother. He came to England

twice a year for several years, and slowly moved a good deal of our wealth into the house here."

Alex noted in silence that Lucien's brother was also dead. "Do you enjoy fencing?" he asked,

changing the subject.

"I love it," Lucien said, his voice brightening.

"Would you care to have a match tomorrow?" he asked. "Just before leaving Italy I began to learn

the French method of fencing, and I would appreciate a chance to practice the art."

"I should be honored," Lucien said formally. "Tomorrow, at Breedhaven's?" Suddenly Alex

remembered Pippa. He couldn't meet Lucien for fencing practice

while she was awake because

she couldn't enter the all-male premises of Breedhaven's Fencing Emporium.

"I would prefer to fence at Sheffield House, if you don't mind," he said without explanation.

Lucien's eyes were puzzled. "Certainly, my lord," he replied. Why on earth would a man want to

fence at his own house instead of at the fencing court? He rose to his feet. He was an unusually

tall Frenchman who came eye-to-eye with Alex. They would be good fencing partners, Lucien

thought with satisfaction.

He held out his hand and Alex shook it without hesitation. "I will see you in the morning, my

lord," Lucien said. He hesitated, and smiled. "I shall not bring my ring to a gaming establishment

again," he said. "There are not many who would show your kindness."

He bowed deeply. "I am truly thankful."

Alex had forgotten all about the ring incident in the pleasure of talking to a well-read man. Poor

old Braddon certainly had grown boring over the past few years. He thought so again when he

rooted Braddon out of one of the gaming rooms. Braddon was up fifteen pounds, and had been

down as much as two hundred; he was also drunk and shaky on his feet.

"Steady," Alex said impatiently, as Braddon tottered toward the door. Lord! The man must be at

least thirty, since Alex was thirty-one; why couldn't he hold his liquor yet? Alex slept

soundlessly, linen sheets pushed down to his waist, exposing a deeply tanned, muscular chest. He

lay perfectly still, on his back with his arms folded behind his head. It was one of the few ways

he and his twin brother, Patrick, could be told apart.

Patrick slept in a tangle of arms and sheets, tossing and kicking all night long. When Patrick was

small his restless sleep often landed him on the floor, where he would simply continue sleeping.

But when Alex was a baby he slept so soundly that his mother used to tiptoe in and touch him,

just to make sure he was still breathing.

It was almost eight o'clock when Alex awoke. The sun was casting bright, slanting lines below

the curtains. He lay back, eyes closed, thinking about the previous night.

But Alex's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of bare feet trotting unsteadily into his

bedroom. "Papa!" shouted a little voice happily. He opened his eyes. Pippa was clutching the

heavy gold brocade of his bed curtains, smiling widely.

He reached down and swept his little daughter up next to him. She giggled and clutched the black

hair on his chest. Oh, Lord. He'd been trying to remember to wear a nightshirt, given her

propensity for joining him in his bedchamber in the morning. She looked small but she had a

powerful grip and loved to pull hair.

"Hey!" he said with mock severity. Pippa nestled down in the crook of his arm and looked at him

expectantly.

"Cocca," she said impatiently. "Me, me!" Alex leaned over and rang the tasseled bell cord next to

his bed. He hated the habit of drinking hot chocolate in bed. But then, he never thought to have a

one-year-old child in his bed either.

Keating appeared at the door, silver tray in hand. Neatly arranged on the tray were two sturdy

mugs, filled precisely to the midpoint with hot chocolate. When Pippa and Alex first returned

from Italy and Alex deciphered what "cocca" was, the tray had held delicate Wedgwood teacups,

brimming with truly hot chocolate. Now, after a series of mishaps, Alex philosophically drank

lukewarm chocolate from a servant's mug.

Pippa sipped chocolate while she sang her morning song, something Maria must have taught her.

Alex thought it was - or had been - an Italian children's song, but Lord knows what any of the

sounds were meant to represent. Pippa's language skills were none too good, although she said

"Papa" very clearly.

Suddenly she clutched his arm, spilling some chocolate on the sheets. "No! No, Papa, no!" she

said. She was escalating into panic, her small body starting to shake. Alex grabbed her chocolate,

put it on the table next to the bed, and pulled her against his chest, whispering into her ear.

"Pippa, it's all right, remember? It's all right." He rubbed her back rhythmically. "Calm down,

Pippa, you know Papa won't leave you.

I promised, remember?" Finally he looked up. There in the doorway, a look of horror in her eyes,

was Pippa's new nanny, hired a day earlier.

"My lord," said Miss Virginia Lyons, and stopped.

"Yes?" "My lord, what is Lady Philippa doing here?" Alex looked at her in some surprise. "Why

shouldn't she be here?" he said. "I don't mind. And it keeps her

from screaming."

Miss Virginia opened her mouth and stopped again. She didn't even know how to formulate an

answer to such a basic question.

"Children," she finally said, "are to be seen and not heard, at the proper times, in proper places.

The rest of the time they stay in the nursery."

"She screams in the nursery," Alex said. "I explained that to you yesterday. She screams so

loudly that she can be heard in the basement - and the nursery is on the third floor. And she

drums her feet against the floor. I can't have that," he said reasonably.

Alex frowned a bit at Miss Virginia. She was red in the face. He adjusted the sheets, pulling them

a little higher. Then he waved his hand dismissively.

"Miss Virginia, we are not yet receiving company."

The nanny was not ready to give up. "Lady Philippa must come with me now. She does not

belong in a man's bedchamber - " Alex cut her off. "Miss Virginia, while I accept with some

reservations the presence of my child in this bedchamber, I am not ready to extend the privilege

to all the staff. Please. We will join you, in the nursery, after breakfast." He smiled amiably at

Miss Virginia, whose face was fiery red now, and she backed out of the doorway.

"That was not kind of us," he murmured into Pippa's hair. Now that the menace (as Pippa saw all

nannies) had disappeared, Pippa was humming happily and trying to grab her chocolate again.

Alex settled her firmly against his side and handed her the scant third of a cup left in her mug.

His own chocolate was stone cold. He finished it in one gulp, shuddering slightly.

"Come on, Pippa," he said, taking away her empty cup and ignoring her indignant wail. She liked

to trail the last drops over his bedsheets. Like magic, Keating appeared with a large tub of

steaming water. During the last month he and Keating had worked out a routine.

With a practiced hand Alex stripped off Pippa's nightgown and plopped her in the water.

Ignoring the little waves splashing over the side of the tub, he scrubbed her clean. Then he

smoothly pulled her squirming plump self out of the bath, handing her to Keating, who waited

with a large towel. Pippa was fairly silent, meaning that she only yelled three or four times. And

they weren't the terrified wails that disturbed the whole household, only loud yelps. Keating bore

her off into the next room to get dressed, while Alex took a quick bath and dressed himself.

Too bad Keating couldn't simply be her nanny, Alex thought, remembering the embarrassed Miss

Virginia waiting on the floor above. Pippa was gurgling away in the next room, while Keating

sang a little ditty to her. Alex cocked his ear. It was clearly a seafaring song, and probably not fit

for young - or any - female ears.

He sighed. Time to rejoin Miss Virginia. The last nanny had lasted only two days, worn out, she

said, by screaming hysteria. She suggested that Alex send Pippa to an asylum for treatment; Alex

only barely stopped himself from tossing her into the street without any baggage.

Pippa toddled into the room smiling widely. "Papa!" she said.

"Papa!" Alex looked at his small

daughter. She was perhaps a year old. Maria had died so quickly that he never found out exactly

when Philippa was born. And the only way he could find out was to contact the priest, or

ex-priest, whom Maria married after annulling their marriage, and that he refused to do. Besides,

once he got the measure of the screaming child Pippa seemed to be, his only thought was to get

her back to doctors in England.

But on their fourth day together, Pippa had stopped struggling against his arms and simply

looked up at him. "Papa," she said softly. And with growing confidence, "Papa, Papa, Papa."

Since then she screamed only when he wasn't either with her or in the next room. The minute he

tried to leave, she split the air with riveting screams, or worse, lay down on the floor and had

hysterics. It was, he guessed, the fruit of her mother's illness and death. Doctors varied from

suggesting institutionalization to saying she'd grow out of it.

Alex's jaw tightened. He needed a wife. Men weren't supposed to be bathing infants or choosing

nannies. Obviously he didn't pick nannies very well. Miss Virginia was the fifth in two weeks.

He scooped up Pippa and headed to the nursery.

At two o'clock that afternoon, Campion was reigning over a quiet Calverstill House. The duke

and duchess were visiting the new exhibition of Italian marbles. Charlotte had painted all

morning and was just taking a bath and dressing. Lord Holland was due in a half hour, to

accompany her to a picnic al fresco. The household had noted

with discreet interest the frequency

with which Lord Holland accompanied Charlotte. Not that they were in agreement about him.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Simpkin, was a strong supporter of Lord Holland.

"He's . . . he's so romantic," she said, patting her ample bosom. "He's a real gentleman, Mr.

Campion, always so finely dressed."

"That's not the point, Mrs. Simpkin," said Campion severely. "The question is, is he a gentleman

underneath? Why doesn't he have any money, think you? Because he gambles, most likely. And

would he stop gambling once he had Lady Charlotte's money? I ask you!" "We don't know that

he gambles," protested Mrs. Simpkin. "Perhaps he lost his inheritance in a fire."

"Unlikely," said Campion. "Most unlikely, Mrs. Simpkin. Because, had there been such a fire, we

would have read about it, wouldn't we? And we didn't. Therefore he gambles."

"He loves her," Mrs. Simpkin replied illogically. "He loves her; I can see it in his eyes."

"His eyes!" Campion said with disgust. "There's another problem. They are too blue. No man has

eyes that blue."

When someone thumped the heavy brass knocker that afternoon, Campion opened the door

majestically, prepared to intimidate Lord Holland's manservant, who had to act as footman as

well.

But at the door was a proper footman, a regular long-jawed type dressed in fancy livery from

head to toe. Campion recognized quality when he saw it, and this

was a quality servant.

"May I help you?" said Campion in his deepest voice (for Campion too was a quality servant).

"The Earl of Sheffield and Dowries requests the presence of Lady Charlotte Daicheston at a

picnic al fresco," said the long-jawed one.

By this point Campion had taken in the elegantly hung, gold-embossed carriage that waited

before the house. Of course, he ought to point out that Lady Charlotte was previously engaged,

and send this footman on his way. But perhaps he should send a message upstairs first? An earl,

after all.

Campion finished his calculations without moving one facial muscle. "I will ascertain whether

Lady Charlotte is available," he said, closing the huge doors of Calverstill House.

The quality footman retreated back to his position, standing behind Alex's carriage. Quiet

descended on Albemarle Square for five minutes. Suddenly the door of the carriage flew open

and Alex, with Pippa rather precariously situated on his shoulder, descended and climbed the

steps. He briskly banged the door knocker.

Campion was not at his post, so the second housemaid, a rather timid girl who had only recently

been promoted to an upper housemaid, opened the door instead. She was no match for a real earl

demanding to see Lady Charlotte. She curtsied so deeply that her knees knocked together, and

fled upstairs.

"Lady Charlotte," she stammered. "He's here, now, here, downstairs, here, in the Green Room,

here."

Charlotte looked up, startled. She was sitting in front of her dressing table while Marie put a few

deft finishing touches to her hair.

She was wearing a walking dress of rosy silk. It left her slender arms bare; Marie was threading a

ribbon of the same color through her curls.

Charlotte had a good sense of who the Earl of Sheffield and Downes must be. Her heart was

beating fast.

Part of her yearned to race out to his carriage. But she had an engagement with Lord Holland, and

ladies do not break appointments on a whim. Marie's hands were trembling with excitement. The

gossip columns were full of information about the handsome earl and his recent return from Italy.

Meanwhile Campion took the flummoxed housemaid's arm in a strong grip that promised

retribution for her garbled message.

Servants were never to be disturbed by anything that might happen in the household, as he

himself had lectured the downstairs staff just a week or so ago.

Of course, in Calverstill House nothing really happened to disturb a servant, but Campion

rigorously lectured those under his command anyway. You never knew about underservants.

They might quit at any moment and join a household full of unsteady characters or drunkards.

His training was intended to prepare them to behave impeccably no matter where they found

themselves.

With the steadying influence of Campion's hand on her arm, the second housemaid (whose name

was Lily), pulled herself together and curtsied to Lady Charlotte. "The earl is downstairs and I put

him in the Green Room," she said, fairly clearly. "And he's not alone. He has a small child with

him."

Charlotte rose. Her heart was beating like a triphammer. "Thank you, Lily," she said. "I shall see

him myself." She descended the stairs, her mind whirling. He couldn't be married, could he? Her

heart felt painfully large in her chest.

Charlotte paused in the door of the Green Room. It was he. He had his back turned to her, but she

would recognize his broad shoulders anywhere. Her eyes swept down his back. He was wearing

an elegant gray jacket, molded to his large body, and skintight pantaloons in dove gray, with high

boots. Her eyes stopped at his feet.

Sitting between his feet was one of the plumpest, most enchanting children she had ever seen.

The little face peering between the earl's boots had round cheeks and three or four dimples, and

unmistakably, her father's flyaway eyebrows.

Charlotte smiled. The little girl's face darkened and she let out an earsplitting yell. Charlotte

instinctively took a step backward, just as Alex swung about. He easily pulled the baby up onto

his shoulder, patting her. "Shhhhhh," he said softly. "This is not a nanny; this is Lady Charlotte.

Shhhhhh."

Charlotte cleared her throat. She was uncertain about what to say. She had never been introduced

to the man; in fact, she only just learned his name from her butler. Nothing taught to her in Lady

Chatterton's School for Young Gentlewomen had prepared her for this situation.

Then Alex looked up from soothing his daughter and smiled. His dark eyes crinkled at the

corners. Charlotte felt a warm glow that began in her belly and spread through her body.

He stepped forward and, holding his daughter firmly against his shoulder, ceremoniously thrust

out his right leg and made a deep bow. Pippa gurgled with delight at suddenly being brought

forward and back upright.

"May I present Lady Pippa McDonough Foakes, daughter of Alexander McDonough Foakes, the

Earl of Sheffield and Downes?" he said solemnly.

A bubble of laughter moved up Charlotte's chest. "Lady Pippa," she said obediently, and curtsied.

Pippa giggled.

"Pippa," said her father, "pay attention. I would like to introduce you to Lady Charlotte

Daicheston, the daughter of the Duke of Calverstill."

Pippa giggled again. She had an infectious giggle; Charlotte laughed back.

"I shall put you down now, Pippa. You can see that Lady Charlotte is not a possible nanny, so I

don't want to hear any more yelps."

Pippa seemed to understand. When Alex put her on the floor she simply crawled over to the sofa

and began tangling the striped tassels that adorned its seat cushions.

Alex stepped forward again and stood just in front of Charlotte. She turned faintly pink. Her

heart was bearing so fast she was afraid that it was visible through her thin dress.

"Do you know," he said conversationally, "you are the first female I have ever met whom I

always want to kiss?" Charlotte's eyes flew up to meet his. She was not going to be the silent

peahen that she was the last time they met! She smiled wryly. "Dare I say that the feeling is not

mutual?" "No?" Alex said. Suddenly he bent his head and brushed his lips, feather-soft, across

hers. Unthinkingly she parted her lips under that gentle persuasion. She felt his warm breath on

her mouth, and for an instant the kiss deepened, and his mouth turned from pleading to

commanding, from persuasion to demand. Charlotte's entire body relaxed; had he not instantly

steadied her with large hands on her bare arms, she might even have toppled.

And that was enough to return her to sanity. Furious at herself, she drew back.

Alex looked at the woman in front of him with wonder. He was only barely in control. This

woman with her tossed black curls and rosy mouth moved him like no woman he had ever met.

The only thought in his mind was to sweep her into his arms and carry her over to the sofa.

He noted with satisfaction that a pulse was beating wildly in her neck. Charlotte was not

impervious to him either. "Shall I summon your butler to introduce us," he said calmly, "or is a

mutual tumble on the staircase enough?" Charlotte bit her lip, trying not to laugh aloud. "My

lord," she said, but at that moment the doors to the Green Room swung open.

Campion's ample form appeared in the doorway. "Lord Holland," he announced sententiously.

Oh bother, Charlotte thought.

But Alex's head had jerked up at Campion's voice. "Will!" he positively shouted, and strode

forward.

Charlotte swung around to find the two men beating each other on the back. Charlotte glanced

back and met Pippa's eyes, curious to see whether she screamed at every person who entered the

room. But Pippa had simply returned to tangling sofa tassels, without a second look at Lord

Holland.

Alex caught Charlotte's glance. "No, she distinguishes between the sexes. It's women she can't

stand," he added hastily, "at the moment, of course."

Will Holland was trying to figure out what was happening. His carriage was outside, loaded with

delicacies for a picnic al fresco with Charlotte. Moreover, in his pocket was nestled a small but

exquisite circle of diamonds, once his mother's, which he hoped to bestow upon Charlotte. But

here was Charlotte, unchaperoned except for a small child, with an old friend whom he thought

was still in Italy. And she looked - well, she looked kissed. Her mouth was rosy and her cheeks

flushed; Will's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

The last thing he wanted was to be in competition with an earl, for God's sake.

Still, like the rest of London, he knew that Alexander's first wife had annulled their marriage on

grounds of impotence. He had found it hard to believe, given acute memories of nights in the best

London brothels, accompanied by Alexander and his brother, Patrick.

Why, he distinctly remembered opening the wrong door, in a very select establishment

maintained by a woman known as Serena - and Alex definitely hadn't been impotent at that

point.

"Lady Charlotte," he said easily, holding out his hand. "Are you prepared to join me for our

picnic?" "Oh, dear," said Alex with mock sadness. "Now, that is precisely the occasion for which

I arrived here. And Lady Charlotte has been explaining to me that

she has a miserable memory,

and so she accidentally promised to accompany both of us."

Charlotte stifled a giggle. "I think," she said with a reproving glance at Alex, "that I shall accept

Lord Holland's invitation, as it was the first extended."

"Oh, no," Alex said. "Why, Will and I are old friends, aren't we, Will?" Will nodded slowly.

"So we will all go together," said Alex. "I have two carriages outside with more than enough

picnic food and a nanny. Why don't we all meet at the east side of Hyde Park, next to the statue

of Eve? Will, perhaps you would accompany Lady Charlotte?" Will nodded, his head spinning.

Why on earth were they all going on a picnic together? And if Alex was competing for

Charlotte's hand, why did he so carelessly hand her over to him? He had to know that the carriage

was a perfect tete-a-tete.

For her part, Charlotte was furious. She wasn't as naive as Will Holland. She knew that she was

outmaneuvered. After being so thoroughly kissed, she was unlikely to enjoy Will's company

overmuch in the carriage. No doubt, that was what this Alexander - or Alex, as Will called

him - had surmised.

Ha! she thought vengefully.

And so when they were in the carriage and Will put a gentle arm around her shoulder, she

unresistingly moved closer and lifted her face for a kiss in an entirely natural gesture that made

Will's hopes skyrocket. He kissed her skillfully, his tongue racing over her lips, parting them

delicately.

Charlotte's mind remained entirely clear. She did enjoy it, to a point. But there was nothing there

to make her knees weak, or to make her feel instantly flushed. Even when a hand descended to

her curls and pulled her closer, she didn't feel a tingle in her stomach.

Will wasn't fooled either. Charlotte was not responding at all. He pulled back and smiled down at

her.

"I think," he said, "that we should have a well-bred conversation, like the well-bred people that

we are. Do you know, I think I saw your friend Cecilia Commonweal yesterday in Clark &

Debenham? She appeared to be buying fourteen ostrich plumes, dyed a violent purple. Do you

think that is possible?" Charlotte giggled and then caught herself. "Feathers are all the rage," she

observed, not sure how possible it was to defend Sissy's fashion sense.

"Oh, really?" Will said saucily. "And will London soon be seeing Lady Charlotte dressed up like

one of the king's best horses?" To Charlotte's mind it was taking an awfully long time for their

carriage to arrive at Hyde Park. In fact, Will had directed his coachman to drive around the park

twice before stopping, since he had hoped to spend the time passionately kissing his future bride.

But there was no talk of marriage in the Holland coach. Charlotte and Will wrangled amiably

over fashion trends and the latest excesses of the Prince of Wales; the diamond ring that once

belonged to his mother rested undisturbed in Will's pocket.

When the coach finally stopped, Charlotte swiftly glanced around before lowering her eyes and

pretending a modest uninterest in the whereabouts of the Earl of Sheffield and Downes. Clearly

his coach had not yet arrived. Will's heart lifted. Perhaps Alex was giving him a chance, after all.

He led Charlotte gently off toward the willow pond, leaving his man to prepare the picnic. For

her part, Charlotte tried to keep her attention on what Will was saying, but her mind kept

wandering. She desperately wanted Alex - the earl, she reminded herself - to appear, and yet she

was furious with herself for the wish. Why should she look for him? He didn't even remember

her! "Charlotte," said Will patiently, as he repeated himself yet again, "what do you think of the

prince's gold heels?" "Ah . . ." Charlotte looked up at him, hopelessly confused. "The prince's

gold heels?" "Yes," Will said. He looked at her expectantly.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said humbly. "I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about."

"I know," said Will with a wry smile. "That's because I've been making up nonsense, and you

have been very charmingly nodding and agreeing with whatever I say."

"Oh," Charlotte said with a little gasp.

Will firmly drew her over to a nearby bench. They sat down for a moment and watched two

sullen swans trolling for bread. Weeping willows hung down over the pond, their branches

trailing into the water like strands of wet hair.

Charlotte longed to be back in her calm studio, finishing her portrait of Sophie. She had posed

Sophie - somewhat ridiculously, she would admit - in a bluebell wood, and it had turned into an

endless task, painting bluebells stretching into the distance. Yet even if she was occasionally

bored in the studio, at least there she was never buffeted by desire, or flushed with sudden

humiliation.

Now she was on a picnic without a chaperone, escorted by a handsome young man who seemed

to be in love with her, and she could not keep her mind clear. Will's tousled blond hair and blue

eyes left her pulse unmoved. But all she had to do was remember that she would soon be seeing

Alex and her body instantly responded, tingling from her toes to her fingers.

"Charlotte," said Will, putting his hands on her shoulders and turning her toward him. "I would

like you to do me the honor of becoming my wife."

"Oh," Charlotte gasped again. She had been refusing marriage proposals for weeks, and suddenly

she had forgotten all her lines.

Will didn't wait for her to answer; he simply lowered his head and kissed her. Charlotte snapped

out of her hazy state and began to feel distinctly annoyed. What was it about these men? They

seemed to think they could plaster their lips to hers at any moment they wished! She drew back

sharply, rising to her feet.

"Lord Holland," she said calmly. "You and I have already discussed the subject of marriage and I

refused your hand."

For an instant Will just sat on the bench and looked up at her. That was before, he thought

silently. Before you cut your hair, before you changed your dress, before you became so

irresistible. But how can you tell a woman that this time you really mean it? How could you say

such a thing without revealing that you had been hunting her fortune and not herself, even if you

were no longer? He rose and took her hands in his. "Charlotte, I -" But whatever he meant to say

was broken off.

Charlotte's eyes flew past his shoulders and a small but radiant smile broke over her face. Will

stared down at her in stupefaction for a few seconds, then dropped her hands in resignation,

turning around. Striding through the trees toward them was a chattering party of elegantly

dressed people including Alexander Foakes, the Earl of Sheffield and Downes, who once again

carried his small daughter perched on his shoulder.

Will looked down at his companion. Her face grew faintly rosy as she watched the earl approach.

She seemed entirely unaware of Will's presence. The baron's shoulders drooped slightly. He was

no fool. Charlotte was lost to him . . . unless . . . could she be aware of Alex's impotence? For a

mad instant Will pictured himself telling her, comforting her as she threw her disconsolate self

into his arms. Insanity. How on earth would you tell a gently bred young lady such a thing? Why,

she probably didn't even understand the mechanics involved! He glanced at Alex. It seemed so

unlikely, anyway. Alex's large, muscled body suited the current fashion for skintight pantaloons

perfectly. Even from here Will found it extremely unlikely that he was incapable.

Damn it! Will felt a stab of pain in his chest. He had grown so used to the idea of hunting a

young woman for her fortune that he had forgotten that real emotion could be involved. But ... he

glanced down again at Charlotte. Her lips were upturned in a welcoming smile; in her eyes was a

look he had never seen before. Oh, die hell with it, Will thought. Even if her parents did send

Alex packing (what parents would allow a girl to marry a man with an impairment like that?) she

would never really be his.

And at that point Will, unbeknown to himself, moved smoothly out of the category of fortune

hunter. He turned a corner that disallowed marriages made solely on the basis of money.

For his part, Alex instantly noticed Charlotte's rumpled hair and pink face, and a swell of rage

rose in his throat. How dare Will touch her, he thought furiously. How dare she kiss another

man? Pippa, sensing the current of emotion pulsing through his body, clutched his hair and began

to cry.

"Hey," Alex said softly, swinging his daughter down against his shoulder and smoothing her hair.

"Shhhh, Pippa."

"Papa," Pippa sobbed, "Papa."

"Lord." Alex sighed, and waving his hand at the small band, said carelessly, "Will, do the pretty

for me, please? I'm going to take this little fish bait for a walk." He set off without a backward

glance.

Charlotte watched, nonplussed, as the earl rounded a bend in the path and disappeared. That was

it? He shambled off, like someone's groom? She felt a flush rise up her cheeks. By God, she

wasn't an easy wench, ready to fall into his hands the moment he raised his finger.

"Well," said Lord Holland, "I should certainly like to 'do the pretty,' as Alex has it, but I'm afraid

I haven't had the pleasure." He looked appreciatively at the lovely young woman who had just

arrived.

The gentleman with her made a low and elegant bow. "I, sir, was the Marquis de Valconbrass

but" - he shrugged in a very Gallic fashion - "now I am simply Lucien Boch. And this is my

sister Daphne."

Daphne sank into an elegant curtsy. She was very young, probably only sixteen, but she already

wore her hair up in a chignon, indicating that she had been presented at Court. She looked, to

Charlotte's mind, quintessentially French, with dainty features and a strong yet delicate chin. She

seemed at once romantic and intensely practical. Her hair was so fair it looked like spun silver,

and it shone in the sun. And her clothes were exquisite, from the tip of her parasol to the glimpse

of rosy slippers peeking out from beneath her fashionable gown.

Lord Holland bowed as gracefully as the marquis. "Lord Holland, at your service," he said

cheerfully, "and this is Lady Charlotte Daicheston, daughter of the Duke of Calverstill. It is a

delight to meet you." He raised Daphne's hand to his lips.

Lucien shrugged, looking off in the direction taken by Alex. "Shall we return to the carriages? I

believe the picnic is being set up in that direction."

Charlotte felt a bubble of laughter rising inside her. This was too ridiculous! She was on a picnic

with a rejected suitor, who rather than sulking seemed perfectly ready to turn his attentions to

Daphne; another possible suitor, if she could even call Alex that, considering his inattentive

behavior; and a third man whom she had never seen before in her life.

"Sir," she said to Lucien, "since our host is so whimsical, why should we not be equally

wayward? I, for one, would much enjoy a small walk before eating."

Alex recognized immediately the work of a master opponent when a good while later a happy

band rounded the corner, walking toward the picnic laid out in the sun. His footmen had set out

linen tablecloths of the palest gold an hour ago; napkins embossed with his crest were stacked

next to silver tableware; the champagne was slowly warming in pools of melting ice. He was

stretched out on the grass, his mouth irresistibly quirked with amusement as he watched

Charlotte stroll toward him, head turned appreciatively toward Lucien, her eyes shining with

laughter at something he had said. Foiled, Alex thought. Hoist with my own petard! That will

teach me to indulge in a fit of petulance.

He rose easily to his feet. "You see," he said with a welcoming smile, "our tempers are restored

and we await you." He gestured at Pippa, happily picking grass, but Charlotte had to compress

her lips to avoid laughing. Surely he had emphasized our, ever so slightly? There was a moment

of silence as everyone arranged themselves on the linen.

"Aha!" Will said. "I see that my meager picnic has been supplemented by regal fare!" Charlotte

was trying to figure out why she sank naturally into a place next to Alex. Remember, she told

herself fiercely. Remember the way he treated you before. Do not make a booby of yourself

again! Yet even the lightest touch of his hand on her arm made her shiver.

"Sir," she said, keeping her tone light and indifferent.

"I merely wanted to offer you a strawberry," said Alex with dulcet sweetness. He was stretched

out on one side, propped up by an elbow. He leaned forward and handed her a strawberry.

"Ah, where is your daughter, that is, Lady Pippa?" Charlotte asked weakly.

The earl rolled back and Pippa came into view on his other side.

"Should she be eating grass?" Charlotte asked.

"Probably not," Alex said in an unperturbed fashion. "Here, Pippa, you stop eating that grass.

You're not a horse." He took the uneaten strawberry out of Charlotte's hand. "Eat this instead," he

said, putting the strawberry into Pippa's plump hand. She looked at it with interest and smashed it

against her face.

"My goodness," Charlotte said. "She looks like a lot of work. Doesn't she have a nanny?" "Oh,

yes," Alex replied. "The nanny's over there." He nodded toward a small grove of trees. His

servants were decorously seated in a small group. Unlike their master, they were seated on

benches, and rather than champagne, they seemed to be drinking ale. The one woman was

unmistakably dressed in the uniform of a governess.

"Why is she over there and not here with Pippa?" Charlotte persisted.

"Pippa doesn't like her very much," Alex said. "I don't seem to pick nannies terribly well. She's

had five of them in the last few weeks, but none of them seemed to take. Here, I'll show you the

problem." He picked up Pippa and put her down between his body and Charlotte's. Pippa took

one look at the woman to her left and broke into hysterical sobs. Alex hauled her back over his

body with a practiced grasp. As soon as she was removed from Charlotte's vicinity, she gave one

final sob and settled back down to picking grass. And eating it, Charlotte noticed.

"Why?" she asked simply.

"Her mother was gravely ill, for three or four weeks, I'm not sure how long. And Pippa was left

with a succession of nannies - they kept leaving for fear of catching Maria's scarlet fever."

"Oh, poor thing!" Charlotte said. "And now she is afraid of women?" "That's it," said Alex. "So

you see," he added lazily, "I'm afraid the only thing left for me to do is to get married. She doesn't

like nannies, or governesses. I think the only way she'll ever get used to women is if I marry one."

He looked over at her, his black eyes dancing. "What do you think?" "Perhaps," Charlotte

replied. "Don't you think it's rather an extreme measure?" Alex shrugged slightly. "You know

how it is; there comes a time in every man's life when he feels the chill of old age . . . the breath

of the grave . . . the - " "Oh, please!" Charlotte laughed. "You must be all of what? Thirty-five?"

"Thirty-one actually, but I must marry," Alex persisted. He had somehow drawn even closer.

"Why, Aunt Henrietta has told me so many times. You see," he

said, tickling her nose with a

piece of grass, "the future of the Earldom of Sheffield and Downes lies in my hands."

Charlotte was biting her lip, trying not to laugh. "What about your twin brother?" she whispered.

They were so close together now that there was hardly a need to speak out loud at all.

"Alas," said Alex. "Patrick is in India, and life is so uncertain. No, I must marry - for the good of

the earldom, you understand."

"Hmmm," said Charlotte. "Such a sacrifice. How lucky I am not to be a man! I could never bring

myself to it."

"No?" Alex asked. "Even if it was truly necessary?" "Why ever would it be?" Charlotte said. "I

have an independent income, and my brother, being a man, is all that is needed to carry on my

father's dukedom. No" - she shook her head, her eyes shining with mischief - "I foresee a future

without a husband. But," she said, patting the earl's hand comfortingly, "I can recommend some

very nice women for you. After all, your requirements aren't very high - only that she be

maternal - a widow with several children would be just the ticket. Let's see, there's Lady

Doctorow.

She's not precisely beautiful, but only the strictest critic would say she was homely. More

important, she is very motherly, and she has five children already, so she is sure to like Pippa!"

"Oh, no," said Alex. "My wife can't have children already. No, Lady Doctorow is out."

"Well," Charlotte began, but she was interrupted by Daphne

Boch.

"That child," she said rather sharply, "has fallen asleep with her face on a plate."

The entire party swung about. Pippa had indeed fallen asleep, her face lovingly pressed into a plate that had once held ice cream.

Moreover, she still had strands of grass sticking to her face, mixed with mashed strawberry. In

all, she looked so thoroughly motherless that Charlotte's heart turned over.

Alexander merely picked her up and looked about for a suitable cloth to wash her face. When he

didn't see one, he turned and in one smooth gesture plumped Pippa straight into Charlotte's lap.

"Would you hold her for one second?" he asked with a charming smile. "I will trot over and see

whether the nanny fell in the lake or what."

Even from here Charlotte could tell that Pippa's young nanny was having an excellent time

flirting with the earl's four footmen and the baron's one attendant.

She looked down at Pippa, who thankfully had not woken up and was now loudly sucking her

thumb. He wasn't joking. Alex really was looking for a mother for Pippa, and she was apparently

the current candidate for motherhood. She had a split-second urge to roll the dirty, rather damp

child straight out of her lap. But then . . . Pippa was sleeping so sweetly, her face pressed against

Charlotte's knee. She stayed put, torn between indignation and tenderness.

Alex seemed to be spending an awfully long time talking to his servants. She looked up to find

the rest of the party gazing at her in horrified amusement.

"I am so sorry," remarked Daphne in her strong French accent. "Your beautiful gown will be

quite ruined. And that gown was made by Madame Careme, was it not? This earl does not

exhibit good manners!" Will gazed at Charlotte thoughtfully. Could it be that a crack was

appearing in her enchantment with his handsome friend? Perhaps he could use the child as a

wedge? But no. Will sighed inwardly. Better to flirt with the accomplished Daphne and forget the

dream of a witty, lovely Charlotte next to him in bed. Charlotte wasn't howling with indignation,

and that probably meant she didn't mind having a messy brat hurled into her lap.

Charlotte felt an embarrassed flush rise up her neck. Alex's maneuver was hardly subtle. She felt

as if the whole party was judging her aptitude for motherhood.

Lucien's sharp eyes noted her mortification and he rose gracefully and bent over her.

"May I?" He nimbly picked up the sleeping child and rolled her deftly into his arms. As Charlotte

watched with surprise, Lucien tucked Pippa into the crook of his arm and smiled down at the

group. "I shall take her for a walk, shall I not?" He strolled off.

Charlotte instinctively looked at Lucien's sister. Daphne's eyes filled with tears and she looked

off past the picnic debris, her face rigid. Will drew Daphne to her Measures feet. Having known

her for only one hour, he already knew that Daphne would dislike showing emotion before

relative strangers.

"Let's go for a walk as well, shall we?" he suggested casually.

They walked off in a different

direction, and if Daphne walked rather blindly, Will appeared to see nothing of it Charlotte sat

alone.

Alex sauntered up, wet linen in hand, and stopped in surprise when he saw no child in her lap. He

crooked an eyebrow at her.

"Lucien ... he took Pippa for a walk," Charlotte said. Alex dropped to the ground beside her.

Charlotte turned to him, her eyes perturbed. "Have Lucien and Daphne lived in England for

several years?" "I believe so," Alex replied.

"And was he married before coming to England?" "Yes."

"I think he had a child as well," Charlotte whispered. "How horrible!" One read of the fate of

French aristocrats, of course, but it didn't seem so bitterly painful until one saw a father hold a

child not his own.

Alex said nothing. He had come to the same conclusion earlier in the day. He and Lucien had

fenced in the long picture gallery of Sheffield House, with Pippa ensconced in a makeshift crib at

one end. Confronted with Pippa, his other male friends had either pretended not to notice her or

complained (justly, no doubt) that she was an ill-handled problem and should be instantly

consigned to a nursery.

Lucien said nothing about her either way, but during a break in the game he stooped over Pippa's

crib and allowed her to teethe on the back of his knuckle. Not one of Alex's unmarried friends

would have known to do that. He himself had been a father for only a month, but he was

continually amazed at the revolting habits propinquity to Pippa had led him to - such as allowing

her to chew on his hand.

"I instructed the servants to clean up," Alex said in his deep voice. "Shall we mimic the rest of

the party and take a small walk?" Charlotte hesitated only briefly before agreeing. They strolled

silently for a while and then sat at the edge of the very willow pond where Will had earlier made

his ill-fated marriage proposal. She and Will had naturally sat on the bench provided, but she and

Alex just as naturally sat on the riverbank. Charlotte didn't even consider the possibility of

further damage to her gown. She sat primly, her arms wound around her knees, staring at the

murky water.

Alex leaned back and put his head on his arms. He pretended to close his eyes but actually

watched Charlotte through lowered eyelashes. She was sitting absolutely still. From his position

on the ground he could see the slender curve of her back, leading up to her beautiful neck, and

just a glimpse of long, curling eyelashes brushing her cheeks. There was no point in analyzing

why he wanted her so much. He did, that was all there was to it. He wanted to run his tongue up

that neck until she shivered with delight.

And given that he needed a wife, the timing of this strange bolt of lust was all to the good.

Charlotte would make a splendid, decorative countess, a delightful bed companion, and sooner or

later she would be an excellent mother to Pippa as well.

He cast a swift look around. No one was within sight. "I suppose,"

he said, "you must think me

very odd to have tipped my child into your lap without notice."
Alex swung about to sit before

Charlotte. "In fact, more than odd: blasted rude. Is this dress a
fabulous French creation?" His

hand slid over the strawberry stains on her knee.

Charlotte had been thinking about the afternoon, and had
decided that she did not like being
embarrassed.

"Oh, no," she said sweetly. "I have no expectations whatsoever
about your conduct."

"Touche!" said Alex appreciatively.

"Let me see," Charlotte continued. "You have entirely forgotten
our first meeting, during which

you - well, never mind that," she added hastily. "During our
second meeting you touched my

back in a most improper way, and on our third meeting you lied
to Lord Holland, who apparently

has some claim to be your friend, finagled your way into this
picnic, left us abruptly before

introducing your friends, and finally thrust an unkempt child
into my lap. I am much inclined to

think," she finished primly, "that there is little you do that
escapes remark, and thus for me to

have expectations of civility would be past hope!" Alex noted
with appreciation that she said

nothing about his hand on her knee. "You are absolutely right,"
he said humbly.

Charlotte looked at him. His hand slid a little higher up her leg.

"You are very provoking!" she said, shaking his hand off her
knee.

He laughed. "I am out of my depth in two areas." His right hand
captured one of hers and gently

bent down her ring finger. "Number one, I have been a father for only a short period, and I don't

feel entirely easy in the role, at least in front of people I don't know well - " "I would say the

contrary, actually," Charlotte broke in. "I don't believe I have ever seen a man who is as easy with

the role as yourself."

"Ah," Alex said hastily, "that is only because I am forced to act as both mother and nanny and so

I appear to be more accomplished than I am." He did not want to go into the reasons why he

abruptly left the group before making introductions. How could one reveal that a perfectly

well-bred peer in his thirties had been caught by a wave of jealousy so intense that he had to

leave the scene in order to avoid giving an old friend a square right to the jaw? "Number two,"

Alex continued, caressing Charlotte's middle finger before bending it down. "I didn't think to

meet a woman I wanted to marry on my first evening back in England. It has taken me rather by

surprise." She looked up at that and was met by a look of wry self-irony.

"Ha!" she said. "I know why you want to marry. You have found yourself burdened with a

one-year-old child who loathes her nanny."

"Actually, you are unlike any nanny I have seen. Where is your tight cap?" He ran his free hand

through her velvety curls. "And I regret to tell you, madam, that your mouth is far too soft to

administer the necessary discipline!" His finger moved to her lower lip.

"Governesses," he continued, "always wear garments which cover their collarbones." His finger

trailed over Charlotte's chin and down to the base of her neck. "I am something of an expert after

ushering five such women in and out of my house in the past few weeks. Governesses," he said

softly, "never, never, never allow a man to see something as beautiful as this. . . ." His finger

swooped over her curves, falling into the delectable dark shadow between her breasts and

lingering there.

Charlotte drew in a sharp breath. She didn't move for a second, shaken by a storm of desire that

began low in her belly and moved up her chest. Then she pulled back. This was exactly what had

happened three years ago. She was about to be seduced on the grass, and this time in broad

daylight! In fact, this particular earl likely made a habit of ravishing young ladies outside. She,

however, was not a pullet ready for plucking.

"My lord," she said coolly. "I must beg you to curb the wandering tendencies of your hands.

There are those who find such undesired caresses . . . distasteful."

Alex's eyes darkened. He leaned forward until there was hardly room between their faces for a

breath of air.

"Are you such a one?" he said, his deep voice sending tremors through Charlotte's knees. She

kept prudently silent. Slowly, keeping his eyes fixed on hers, Alex lifted her right hand to his

mouth and pressed her fingers against his lips. His lips opened and he delicately bit the tip of one

finger. Charlotte's eyes fell, afraid that he would be able to tell how much his very touch affected

her

"Perhaps you are right," he said, with amusement in his voice. Her eyes flew back up to his.

"Even Aunt Henrietta could hardly expect me to marry a reluctant woman."

"Exactly!" Charlotte said, collecting her scattered thoughts and pulling her hand out of his. "I

know just what your aunt would like. A young damsel, just out of the schoolroom." She looked at

him mischievously. "She will fall desperately in love with you on first sight and she probably

won't mind your advanced age . . . much," she added with just a touch of doubt. "You are an earl,

after all!" "That's true," said Alex. "I should probably be wise to point out the coronets on my

coach two or three times, in case she forgets my rank."

"Precisely," said Charlotte approvingly. "Now you're beginning to understand the situation, my

lord. I'm afraid that those with white hair" - she glanced at his curls - "can't expect the same

success in love that is enjoyed by younger men."

"And what should I do," said Alex in an oddly gentle voice, "if I don't like this maiden as much

as she likes me? You do see the problem, don't you? I'm afraid I have a tenderness for, oh, the

on-the-shelf sort of lady, the sort who has been hanging around ballrooms for three or four years.

. . ." His voice trailed off.

Red dots danced before Charlotte's eyes. No one! No one had ever insinuated that she was an

on-the-shelf sort of lady. "I should say that the problem, in fact, is that a more experienced

woman may have too much force of mind to accept your offer, my lord," she said, her mind

registering with approval the evenness of her voice.

Alex sighed loudly. Somehow he had again possessed himself of her hand and brought it to his

mouth. "I am desolate, Charlotte. I had set my heart on this older lady - why, she must be all of

twenty years old, Charlotte - and I'm quite sure that I wouldn't prefer a sixteen-year-old, no

matter how docile."

Charlotte felt fiercely irritated. What a stupid conversation! She didn't even know this man, and

here they were, talking about marriage. He was insulting her. And he was mauling her fingers,

which made it hard to think rationally.

"I feel sure," she said in a perfectly composed voice with just a drop of uninterest, "that when you

actually come to making this painful decision, sir, you will find it to be far easier than you may

believe at present."

Alex growled. She heard it. He growled. And when she looked at him in a rather bewildered

fashion, he jerked her forward and up on her knees, and before she could squeak out a protest,

Alex pulled Charlotte toward him so that their bodies touched from chest to knee.

In fact, had Charlotte struggled, the whole embrace might have become something more athletic

than Alex had in mind. But instead her body betrayed her. She lifted her head as if he kissed her

every day. And Alex's arms tightened in response to her unconscious invitation.

His lips descended fiercely on Charlotte's and, unbidden, her mouth opened. A warm tongue

plunged into her mouth and withdrew, plunged in and withdrew.

Charlotte was instantly

intoxicated, her body responding with fiery awareness to the push of his belly against hers, the

hard strength of his hands molding her back.

Suddenly Alex's lips left hers. Ruthlessly he avoided her pleading mouth, running his tongue

provocatively over her eyebrows, biting the sweet fullness of her bottom lip. Charlotte

unconsciously pressed forward, begging silently for more. He pulled her even closer, molding her

body to every inch of his. His hardness jutted demandingly into her soft curves. Charlotte

gasped and without thinking, she reached up and pulled his mouth down to hers, bringing her

tongue, somewhat hesitatingly but seductively, to touch his lips.

Alex shuddered, almost completely out of control. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew

that this had to stop. They were kissing in the open. Ruining Charlotte's reputation didn't seem a

propitious way to start a So, without saying a word, he rocked back on his heels, swiftly turned

Charlotte about, and pulled her into his lap. Then he wrapped his arms around her from behind

and willed his heart to slow down. She remained absolutely stiff for a moment, and then relaxed,

collapsing against his chest.

Alex rested his chin on top of her fragrant hair. His fingers, willy-nilly, trailed down over the

front of her gown. "Charlotte," he said, his voice deep as black velvet, "I will give you a week to

accept my proposal. After that I'll probably have to snatch you out of your bedroom myself, just

to keep my sanity."

Sensing her intake of breath, he folded his fingers firmly over her mouth. "No." They sat quietly

for a moment and then he felt small even teeth biting his fingers.

"Oh, dear," he sighed. "I forgot I am marrying a woman who has already cut her milk teeth."

But actually Charlotte couldn't think of a single thing to say. She knew, with blinding clarity and

acute humiliation, that she would have made love to this man right here, in the sunshine of Hyde

Park, next to the willow pond, without a single protest. In fact, she'd probably make love to him

anywhere he proposed. She shuddered slightly.

When he pulled her to her feet, Charlotte finally summoned the courage to meet his eyes. What

she saw made her heart bound.

Alex didn't look ironic, or sarcastic, or jeering. Instead, his eyes were an intense, fierce black. He

didn't look at her as if she were a hoyden, but as if she were a drink he would never tire of.

He didn't touch her, just ran his thumb over her eyebrows. "Do you know that we have the same

eyebrows?" he asked. "Do you suppose it is this similarity that has driven me mad with desire

both of the times I've met you?" Charlotte restrained an impulse to correct him. They had met

three times - but how could she possibly say, don't you remember? You ravished me in the

gardens of a ball, three years ago. A large hand cupped her chin, forcing her face up.

"We're getting married," Alex said conversationally, smiling at her. He frowned when he saw the

tiny crease between her brows.

"Are you engaged? Already married?" She shook her head.

"Then," he said with supreme confidence, "we'll be married by special license a week from today."

"No," said Charlotte.

"No?" "No, my lord," she said, and turned to walk back toward the waiting carriages.

Her body was still shaken by his kisses, but her mind was finally clear. Alex treated women like

interchangeable coins. Had she not met him years ago, she would probably have been drugged

today by the sweetness of his kisses and his incredible physical allure.

But he had the same effect on her three years ago, and yet he had walked calmly away from

the encounter and promptly forgotten her. Even though he had taken her virginity. Obviously,

what seemed to her a devastatingly erotic encounter had simply been business as usual to him.

And the only reason he was asking her to marry him now was to get a permanent nursemaid for

his daughter. She'd be damned before she'd marry someone just to care for his child, especially

given that her husband would be out seducing women in a park every time she turned her back.

Her eyes were distinctly cool as she looked at Alex, walking silently next to her. If only he didn't

make her heart turn over just to see him. Even now, walking next to him, her body was fraught

with desire. She longed to walk closer, to run her hand up his arm, to ...

What if she did marry him? They would share a bed. Unconsciously, she sighed out loud. But no.

She steeled herself. Her father respected and loved her mother. She had to keep their example in

mind. This earl was a strange man, abrupt, sometimes impolite.

He would be difficult to live with. She wanted someone who would love her, even if she herself

didn't feel a blazing physical desire for him. Desire was no basis for a marriage.

They walked silently back to the carriages. The rest of the party was already grouped there. Pippa

seemed to be perfectly happy (and now clean); one of Alex's servants was playing with her under

a tree. Daphne, on the other hand, was distinctly annoyed. One elegant slipper tapped under her

light gown. The Earl of Sheffield and Downes had easy ways as a host that did not suit her

French sense of propriety. And Lady Charlotte, she noted with some distaste, looked even more

disheveled than she had an hour ago.

English aristocrats! She would never understand them! No one would ever catch her looking as

unkempt as that duke's daughter.

Alex, on the other hand, looked at Charlotte walking next to him and thought he had never seen

any woman look so beautiful. Her lips were deep red and her short curls were tossed by his hand.

The very arch of her eyebrows made him want to growl like a tiger and throw her over his

shoulder. The sight of her steeled his resolution. No matter what she said, she belonged with him,

in his bed, and that was where she was going to be. She had everything he wanted: true

sweetness, even down to the delicacy of her downcast lashes, along with a blazing passion he had

never experienced in a well-bred woman.

His jaw tightened with resolve. He had simply moved too fast,

that's all. Charlotte was a young,
beautiful woman, courted by half of London. How could he
expect to simply inform her that they
would get married in a week? She had probably never
experienced anything like the swell of
passion they shared today. He'd frightened her. He had to go
slowly, woo her, not ravish her on a
riverbank.

Alex politely escorted his petulant guest, Daphne, to his carriage,
and just as politely hailed Will
good-bye as the baron escorted Charlotte to his carriage. He
ignored the wintery smile with
which Charlotte bid him farewell.

His girl had got herself into a tweak, that was clear, but he could
take care of that tomorrow. In

the carriage he bent himself to coaxing Miss Daphne out of her
disdainful mood. He succeeded
so well - showering her in an artful downpour of compliments -
that her tinkling laughter rilled
the carriage again and again.

Daphne would have sworn that Alexander Fakes's attention was
solely focused on her. But in
fact Alex was brooding over the delicious moment when
Charlotte pressed against his body. His
wife. It had a devilishly good ring to it.

Chapter 7 In the following week London society was treated to the delectable sight of the

handsome but disastrously ineligible Earl of Sheffield and Downes laying determined siege to

the reigning beauty Lady Charlotte Daicheston. No one could quite determine how she felt about

it. She laughed and flirted with all her suitors; she exhibited no particular inclination to favor the

earl. Sharp eyes watched as she gave two dances to one and then two dances to another.

Her mother was torn. Had Adelaide not had the strong suspicion that Alex was the man with

shot-silver hair who took her daughter's virginity three years before, she would unhesitatingly

have told Charlotte the truth and warned - nay, commanded - her to have nothing further to do

with him. But . . . what to do? Her daughter had not confided in her, and Charlotte's demeanor

did not encourage Adelaide to broach the subject.

Marcel, on the other hand, had never been informed about his daughter's misadventures in the

garden three years ago. And so he was violently opposed to the prospect of Charlotte accepting

Alexander Foakes's hand in marriage.

"And so I shall tell him," he blustered at his wife.

"And so I shall tell him, if he has the impudence to ask me for her hand. I will not have one of

my daughters marrying a limp carrot, a ---" He broke off, remembering that there are phrases a

man does not repeat in front of a gentlewoman, even if the lady in question is his wife.

"I understand, Marcel," said Adelaide soothingly.

"And I agree with you, darling, of course. But I think we should

allow Charlotte to dance with

whomever she wants."

"Don't be a peahen, Adelaide! She has no idea, has she?" Marcel swung around, his eyebrows

furrowed.

"No," Adelaide admitted.

"Well, you have to tell her, that's all. I suppose it will be embarrassing, but she has to know the

facts at some point. Blast it! You must have told Violetta and Winifred something before you

set them off on their weddings, didn't you?" "Yes," said Adelaide unhappily, "but - " "You'll just

have to do it, Addie. We can't have all of London chortling at our unknowing daughter. Half of

'em seem to think she's a fortune hunter who doesn't care that the man is a ... a limp rag, and the

other half are laughing at her. I won't have it, do you hear?" He was alarmingly red in the face.

"Do you know how many people have had the infernal impertinence to ask me how I feel, having

my daughter courted by a floppy poppy?" "A floppy poppy," Adelaide repeated, fascinated

despite herself. "That's quite good - a floppy poppy."

"Lord! Don't repeat that, Addie. It's not at all proper," her husband groaned. "Do you see what I

mean, though? People are simply vying to create new nicknames for the man. Don't think I'm not

sympathetic. I quite like him personally. He made a remarkably decent speech in Lords the other

day, about the possibility of corn riots in Suffolk. No one whispered about his incapacabilities then!

But the fact is, he's not a man that a father want courting his daughter. No children, Adelaide.

Have you thought of that?" He glared accusingly at his wife.

"Marcel" she protested. "I'm not suggesting that Charlotte marry the man, I simply don't want to

broach the subject with her. After all she shows no signs of favoring him over any of her other

suitors. Why not let it be for the moment?" "Because at any second he might win her over! You

should have seen him in the House, Addie. The man has a silver tongue. And he's damned

good-looking, I'll give him that. No one would think to look at him that there was anything

wrong. Barring his problem, I'd say he was perfect for Charlotte."

"I see," said Adelaide. "You're afraid she'll fall in love with him."

"If she does, we're in trouble. You know how stubborn she is, Addie. Why, we couldn't even stop

Winifred from marrying that American, and she was the most biddable of all our children. If

Charlotte gets it in her head to marry him, she'll do it. And she won't pay any attention to whether

he's capable or not."

He sat down heavily. "Except she won't be happy, Addie. She can paint all day long in that studio

of hers, but it won't make her happy." Marcel reached up and pulled his wife down to sit on the

bed beside him. "It wouldn't be right."

Adelaide snuggled against her husband's side, torn whether to tell him about Charlotte's

experience in Kent three years ago. Better not, she decided. He would be absolutely furious and

probably charge into Alexander Foakes's town house like a bull. At any rate, she was worried

about that twin brother. What if it had been the other one - what was his name? Some sort of

Irish name, she thought. Well, what if it had been the other twin in the garden? Could Charlotte

tell the difference between them? She quailed at the idea of asking her daughter.

"There's one thing I don't understand, Marcel. Sarah Prestleilld told me - you know how

malicious she can be - that Alexander Foakes has a daughter. In fact, she said that his daughter is

with him practically every moment, and never with a nanny. She's apparently about a year old,

and very ill-trained, and he carries her around town. And Sarah said she looks exactly like him!

So how can this be if he's . . . well . . . incapable?" "I don't know," Marcel said. "I hadn't heard

about a daughter. But you know, Adelaide, this daughter might be anyone's. I gather that his first

wife is dead now. So who's to say whether she was the child's mother or not?" "Well, how would

that change things, Marcel? I don't understand. Either he can, or he can't. And if he can, then we

shouldn't worry about Charlotte."

Marcel sighed. He didn't feel like explaining the intricacies of potency with wives as opposed to

potency with courtesans. "Well, dear," he said uncomfortably, "there's a possibility that

Alexander Foakes's incapability is not, ah, applicable in all situations."

There was a short silence. "Oh, dear," Adelaide said quietly. "This is all so unpleasant. And I like

him, Marcel, I really do. Are you absolutely sure Maybe this is all gossip."

Marcel shook his head. "Several of my so-called friends have taken great pleasure in assuring me

of the accuracy of the report. His first wife, a woman named

Maria Colonna, petitioned the

Pope - she was Catholic, of course - to annul their marriage after one year, claiming that her

husband was impotent. And Alexander Fakes did not contest the annulment. Apparently she

was from a quite good family too, in Rome, and they all considered it a great disgrace. She died a

few months ago, and he returned here. I suppose he came with this child, although no one has

mentioned a daughter to me."

Adelaide tried to think it out. She had a separate problem. She didn't want to let Charlotte know

that Alexander and his brother had attended her coming out ball, and that she had seen them and

not mentioned it to Charlotte. What if she were enraged? What if she thought her mother had

betrayed her? Marcel broke the silence. "They're betting on her in Brooks's," he said heavily.

"There are two whole pages devoted to bets on whether she'll take him or not."

He didn't mention the fact that there was another page devoted to whether a) the marriage would

be annulled, b) Charlotte would take a lover within one year, or c) she would become discreetly

pregnant, thereby giving Alex an heir, but not one that necessarily resembled him.

"It's an ugly situation, Addie. I cannot like it. Why don't you encourage her to take Slaslow? He's

an earl as well, and while he may not be the brightest, I knew his father quite well. He was

sound." To be sound was Marcel's highest praise.

"This Alexander is a loose screw, and it only makes it worse that he's flaunting a child. He was in

scrapes all the time as a young 'un. Not that they were bad ones, I have to say. Just the usual

jackanapes flummery that youngsters get up to. Champagne breakfasts with high-flyers, that sort

of thing. He wasn't a libertine, but . . ." Marcel's voice trailed off as he contemplated the odd fact

that the Earl of Sheffield and Downes was best known in his youth for amorous escapades.

"Perhaps he was in a riding accident," Marcel muttered half under his breath. "But if this

marriage goes forward" he said with renewed vigor, " "we'll end up with our name dragged

through the med. This is England, you know. The scandal would ruin Charlotte." "You don't

need to cut up our peace about it. For goodness sake, all Charlotte has done is dance a few times

with the man!" "Not true," said her spouse with asperity. "She's been on a picnic with him, and

the talk is that she spent some time alone with him at that picnic. Of course, it's just servants'

talk, most likely, but that's the news on the street. She will be ruined, if this goes on, and without

even marrying him at all!" Adelaide absorbed the news of the picnic, about which she knew

nothing, in silence.

"I don't see why," she said stubbornly. "If he is incapable, why should anyone fault her for

spending some time with him? I can't see anything wrong with diverting herself for a time with a

... a floppy poppy!" Marcel glared at her between jutting brows. "Don't repeat that phrase,

madam! It makes you sound like a loose fish. Whenever have you found gossips to be logical?"

'Perhaps not logical, Marcel, but this is ridiculous. How can

Charlotte be ruined by a man who

hasn't the capability to ruin her?" "That's as may be," Marcel said obstinately. "The fact is,

everyone is watching her now because she's with Him. They are simply waiting for her to misstep

and they'll be on her like a hawk with a pullet. Charlotte must give him his marching orders,

now."

"All right," Adelaide said finally. "I'll speak to her. There's something odd about all this."

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sadly. "Oh, where is an earl for me?" She rolled her eyes up to the heavens. "Send me a notorious

lover - please!" "He is not my lover!" "Oh, yes? After you walked down the street holding his

child and looking at him with your heart in your mouth? Then you are leading him astray, and

woe betide the woman who leads that particular man into a blind alley." She nodded down to

their right.

Charlotte watched, fascinated, as Alex strode into the Sheffield box, bowing to his

acquaintances. He appeared to be accompanied by a small party; she recognized the Marquis de

Valconbrass and his sister. She felt a sudden stab of jealousy as Alex escorted Daphne to a place

at the front of the box.

Sophie's strong, small hand descended on her wrist. "Stop watching him, Charlotte!" Charlotte

settled back in her chair, fanning her suddenly pink face.

"Pooh!" Sophie said. "I can't trust you for a minute! Even a fourth part of French blood would

have stopped you from being so obvious."

Charlotte glared at her fiercely. Sophie wrinkled her nose at her. "Don't you carp at me, Charlotte

Daicheston!" She lowered her voice. "You want him, don't you?" Startled, Charlotte nodded.

"Well, you can't have him if he isn't capable," Sophie said practically. "It would not be a

successful marriage."

"I don't think, I mean, I think he is," Charlotte said equally softly.

"Well, you have to find out," Sophie said. "You have to know, and then you can go ahead and

accept him. I assume he has proposed?" She waited, one eyebrow raised.

Charlotte nodded.

"What a woman! You have two earls after you, and what else - a score of mere counts and

barons, and a few lowly sirs."

Charlotte laughed. She was keeping her eyes fixed on Sophie in order to avoid meeting the eyes

of all the people who seemed to be staring in her direction. And to stop herself from stealing

another glance at Alex.

The noise of tuning fiddles finally stopped and Richard Sheridan, the proprietor of the Drury

Lane Theatre, walked out before the red velvet curtain. There was a faint dimming of the

audience's chatter.

Charlotte's mind wandered as Sheridan talked on, boasting of the wonderful changes he had

made to King Lear . . . now fit for a modern audience ... fit for

modern propriety, love of gaiety,

blah, blah. She kept her eyes fixed on the railing in front of her. She had the strong sense that

Alex had no plans to attend the theater until Sophie dropped the name of the play they were

seeing. She had never seen anyone in the Sheffield box except Alex's aunt, Henrietta Collumber.

At the moment she felt as if he must be looking at her. Every nerve in her body signaled that his

eyes were on her. The blood was not dancing in her veins - it was racing. Insanity, Charlotte said

to herself. Insanity! And just how was she supposed to ascertain whether Alex was impotent or

not? She raised her head as the curtains of the theater swung open. Willy-nilly her eyes slid to the

right. Alex was sitting perfectly easily, his long legs stretched out before him and crossed at the

ankles. He actually had his back to her, and his head was bent close to Daphne Boch's smooth

blond locks. It wasn't jealousy Charlotte felt; it was hatred. She jerked her eyes away. The last

thing she wanted was for Alex to catch her glaring at his - friend.

She straightened her back. Two could play at that game. She leaned forward slightly and glanced

about the theater. There was Braddon . . . but Braddon wasn't anyone to make Alex jealous,

unfortunately. Her eyes slid over a number of men whom she might summon in an instant, and

then her eyes brightened. Will Holland, looking like a great blond giant, was sitting in a box

down to the left. He raised his head and she threw him a slight smile, an enchanting, beckoning

smile.

Unfortunately that was the moment when Alex finally allowed himself to throw a glance over his

left shoulder at the Brandenburg box. He stared for a moment, his eyes hard. Damn it! Will's

reaction was about the same. He had spent the last week setting up a useful flirtation with a rich

tradesman's daughter, and she wasn't even too unattractive. But looking up at the unbelievably

sensual duke's daughter, her black curls deliberately tousled as if she just emerged from bed, he

felt all his resolution of the last week fade away. Perhaps Charlotte's parents had warned her

away from Alex. He cast a sapient eye at his old friend, who appeared to be whispering into the

ear of that French miss, Daphne Boch.

If he went up to Charlotte's box during intermission, it might spoil the game with Miss van Stork.

And she wasn't bad; he might never find another heiress this bearable. Chloe van Stork sat

quietly next to him. She had russet hair, not a bad color, and a slim body, he thought. Her

clothing was abominable - she was wearing some kind of thick stuff that looked durable. Will

shuddered slightly. She was probably even wearing one of those huge old corsets made out of

whalebone, given the stiffness of her upper back. Nothing could be further from Charlotte's

gossamer French gowns.

Suddenly Miss van Stork turned her head and looked straight at him. "Are you going to go?" She

nodded up toward the Brandenburg box.

Will gaped at her. She has lovely white teeth, he thought irrelevantly.

"I saw that woman - it's Charlotte Daicheston, isn't it? - I saw her smile at you. I think she would

like you to visit her box."

Will just stared back, nonplussed. Chloe van Stork turned her attention back to the stage, where

two tumblers and a juggler had just left, clearing the way for the play itself. Will studied Chloe's

calm, serious profile, trying to decide what she thought about Charlotte's smile. Did she even

understand what conclusions would be drawn by society if he disappeared from her father's box

and reappeared next to Charlotte? He felt strangely reluctant to drop the flirtation now, when it

seemed to be bearing fruit. He had dinner with Chloe's parents and herself that evening, and

this was the first time he had accompanied them to a public event. He'd be a fool to let a Golden

Fleece slip through his fingers because Charlotte Daicheston whimsically decided to smile at

him.

Suddenly Chloe turned back to him. "Go! Go!" she said fiercely. Will gaped again. She waved

her hand impatiently.

Feeling like a chastised puppy, Will courteously drew himself to his feet and bowed to her and

her parents, murmuring something about greeting some acquaintances. A few minutes later he

appeared in the Brandenburg box, to the great satisfaction of the audience. There was a rush of

chatter. This was going to be an even more interesting evening than anyone had anticipated.

Charlotte sweetly held out her hand to him, and even the stiff marchioness greeted him kindly.

To her mind anyone was better than that abominable earl. Will pulled up a chair and sat just

behind Charlotte, whispering a few quips that made her laugh. She laughed overmuch, he

thought, given the quality of his jokes. He looked over at Sophie. She had her delicate eyebrows

raised and was looking rather amused. Will felt suddenly impatient.

He looked down at the box he had just left. Really, Miss van Stork had a very sweet, upturned

nose, especially given the fact that her father's nose was rather large. The candlelight was

catching her hair, making its red highlights gleam. She looked at the stage, not at him. He

wouldn't mind going back, he thought. Except she had shoed him out of their box as if she knew

that he was just fortune-hunting. . . . Well, of course she does, a voice said in the back of his

mind. Look at her! She's an intelligent woman, dressed like a dowdy in the midst of London's

most elegant women. She knows you only want her fortune. I wonder why she's wearing that

gown, Will thought. He caught himself. What the devil was he doing? He was sitting next to the

most beautiful women in the ton and he didn't even feel like being amusing. He couldn't think of

a single seductive metaphor. He was thinking about a frumpy woman in a corset. Charlotte's

pearly shoulder gleamed next to him, a soft expanse leading the eye irresistibly down to the

creamy mounds rising from her slight bodice. His breathing quickened. Will banished the

thought of Miss van Stork, sitting alone in her box. The hell with it! Didn't he vow to stop

fortune-hunting? Down in his box Alex's fists curled with rage.
He had risked one more look at

Charlotte only to find his old friend Will Holland hovering
behind her and leering down at her

breasts, unless he was grossly mistaken. He turned to Daphne
Boch and, leaning intimately over

to her, complimented her fan. Daphne looked at him a bit
ironically. She had no particular

aversion to flirting with this so-handsome earl, even if he was
really just interested in that tall

beanstalk of an Englishwoman.

The play was starting, trumpeters blowing an entrance, signaling
the presence of the king - King

Lear, that is. Charlotte's thoughts were tumbling over each other,
but she felt calmer now that

Will had joined their box, as if he were camouflage somehow.
She didn't feel so naked, so certain

that everyone in the audience knew that her eyes kept straying to
the right.

Slowly she was drawn in to the story of an old king gone foolish,
demanding that his daughters

swear they love him more than anyone or anything else in the
world or they would inherit no

money, no land, no part of the kingdom. She didn't pay much attention as the two elder sisters

hysterically barked their inability to love anyone beside their father, even with their husbands

standing right beside them. That was life, life in London anyway. People would do anything for

money. Look at Will. She'd summoned him from a tradesman's box, unless she was greatly

mistaken. Charlotte's eyes wandered down to that box. A young woman sat in the front, staring

directly at the stage. From where she was sitting, almost directly above her, Charlotte could see

that her hands were clenched into fists in her lap. She studied her profile for a second, but then

her attention was jerked back to the stage.

The king's youngest daughter was flouncing about, refusing to answer her father. Or perhaps she

said something he didn't like? Charlotte started to listen, her ear first rejecting the old musical

lines as too difficult. Then they suddenly fell into place and became easily intelligible. The

audience calmed, listening intently, and when the first act ended and a buxom Spanish singer

began singing of cherries and lemons, there was a moment of silence before chatter rose into the

rafters.

Charlotte looked back into the box below. There was something she liked about that tradesman's

daughter's face.

"Will," she said softly, turning her head a bit. She gave him her most charming smile. Will

visibly softened. Really, Charlotte thought. Men are such boobies. "Why don't you ask your

friend to join us?" She nodded down toward the woman in the box. "It must be most

uncomfortable down there alone with just her parents for company."

Will's spine grew suddenly cold. He didn't want Chloe laughed at, or mocked in a way she didn't

understand by seasoned society women. His mouth tightened.

Charlotte put a hand on his sleeve. "I would truly like to meet her, Will."

Will's deep blue eyes met hers and he relaxed. He had never heard of Charlotte Daicheston doing

anything shabby or cruel ... so why not? He stood up and a minute later reappeared in the van

Storks' box. Chloe's parents courteously moved out of the way for him, although he knew that

unless they were totally impervious they must be seething at the affront dished out to their

daughter when he visited another woman's box.

He stooped next to Chloe's chair. "Would you like to join the Brandenburgs?" Chloe turned

astonished eyes on him. Her eyes are blue, he thought, as blue as mine. "Why?" she said bluntly.

Will couldn't think of a good lie. "Lady Charlotte requested it."

Chloe's eyes darkened. "It's not like that," Will said urgently. "Charlotte is not that kind of

person."

Chloe looked down at her hands involuntarily twisting the dark twill that her mother insisted her

dresses be made out of. How could she go up to that box and sit with this beautiful woman he

carelessly called Charlotte? She longed to be home, perhaps adding up a column of figures for

her father, or watching her mother pack up boxes of shirts for the

poor.

Her mother leaned forward suddenly. "It is acceptable to us, dearest," she said in her Dutch

accent. Chloe stood up. She hardly had a choice if her own mother was ready to condemn her to

be laughed at by a bunch of ... of peacocks! Tears stung her eyes but she walked steadily out of

the box and down the red-carpeted corridor. People were pacing up and down the corridor,

defeated by Act One of the play and simply waiting for intermission. Chloe walked with her head

down, certain that they were all staring at her.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Will pushed open a door adorned with an elaborate coat

of arms. The door led to a brief corridor which was very dark since the entrance to the box proper

was hung with heavy curtains. He stopped for a moment in the velvety darkness. His hand

pushed up her chin and a voice said, "Courage!" And then a mouth touched hers, very lightly.

Chloe gasped. There was a brief instant of silence and then she heard Will's voice again,

sounding rather surprised. "Let's try that again," he said, and she felt rather than saw his head

descend. His lips touched hers and then she jumped as his tongue smoothly slid into her mouth.

Chloe jerked her head back.

"No, don't," Will said rather thickly, dropping his arms around her back and pulling her against

his chest. This time his lips were forceful, demanding, and she opened her lips. Even through her

whalebone stays Will felt the little shiver that traveled over Chloe's body. His breath was warm

against her lips and then, he couldn't help it, he took her mouth again, unable to believe how a

simple kiss affected him. His hands moved down her back. "My God," Will finally said roughly.

He turned toward Miss van Stork sharply about and pulled open the curtains leading to the box,

half-pushing her through them.

They emerged just as Act Two began. Will pulled Chloe down on a chair, allowing silent,

smiling nods to serve as introductions for the moment. Chloe was surprised: both Charlotte

Daicheston and Sophie York were watching the stage intently, completely ignoring the rustling

audience around them, even though many of those people were looking only at the two women.

She would have thought people like them - people whose names were always in the gossip

columns - went to the theater only to see and be seen. But Charlotte, in particular, was so

absorbed that her knuckles were white on the box railing. Chloe turned her own attention to the

stage. The king, or ex-king now, was hulking about his eldest daughter's house, demanding to

keep a hundred armed men.

Chloe felt a certain amount of sympathy for Goneril, the king's eldest daughter. Who would want

to keep a bunch of feckless soldiers about? Look at the problem her father had with their

servants, and they weren't even armed. The footmen were always in brawls of some sort or

another, and her father had a separate butler's fund just for use in bailing the servants out of

prison. Still, it was heartbreaking to watch the old king divested of all his trappings, all his

kingliness. . . .

For his part, Will couldn't keep his mind on the play at all. He felt absolutely astonished. Chloe

was watching the play, her chest quiedy rising and falling as if nothing at all had happened in the

corridor. Whereas he was distinctly uncomfortable in his tight pantaloons. Even sitting with his

legs crossed wasn't helping, given the proximity of Chloe's round arm. At least her dress didn't

cover every single inch of her body. He looked speculatively at the part of her arm that was

visible. Her skin was a flat, creamy white, and her wrist so delicate that he felt as if it might snap

at any moment. He shifted his legs again. This was not the right thing to be dwelling on at the

moment.

By the time intermission finally came around, Alex, for one, was thoroughly bored. Shakespeare

was one thing. For God's sake, they had acted King Lear themselves when he was a schoolboy at

Eton. But this wasn't King Lear. This was a stupid, adulterated muddle. He couldn't believe his

own eyes when the Fool started dancing an Irish jig. It was clear already that this Cordelia was

not going to die, not if the theater manager had anything to do with it - and he already had

entirely too much to do with the whole play. Who were these new characters, for example? And

some had definitely disappeared. He knew damned well that Gloucester used to have a bastard

son, because that was the role he played at school! He felt nothing but relief when the curtain

finally fell on the end of the third act.

Without conscious thought Alex smilingly raised Daphne from her seat and suggested a stroll in

the corridor. Daphne showed no sign of surprise when they headed directly for the stairs leading

to the next level of boxes.

"I would be happy to meet Lady Charlotte again," she finally said, tired of walking next to a

silent companion. Now they were not being watched by the entire audience, the earl seemed to

feel no need to speak to her at all.

Alex came to a halt. "Am I so obvious?" he said with a charming, ironic smile.

"Oui," said Daphne. "You do not hide your feelings so well. But then, that is not an English

trait," she said meditatively.

Alex began walking again, albeit more slowly. "And Lady Charlotte?" he asked.

"Well." Daphne gave a very Gallic, dismissive shrug. "She too has no ability to disguise herself."

They arrived at the Brandenburg box, only to find that the hallway outside was filled with men

trying to jostle themselves into a position to get through the door to the box. A little hush fell

when Alex and Daphne appeared, however, and as if by magic the gentlemen pulled back

slightly. Alex walked gently through the crowd. The footman guarding the door doffed his hat

and Alex and Daphne disappeared through the door, pulling it decisively closed behind them.

They emerged into the glare of the theater slightly blind after the silky darkness of the corridor.

The Marquess - or Marquis, to use the preferred spelling - of Brandenburg turned around

sharply. He had distinctly told Pierre not to allow any more men into the box.

There were already more than enough young bucks in here, breathing down his daughter's low

dress. He groaned inwardly when he saw who had breached the footman's defenses. Lord! This

would make Eloise breathe fire.

But the Earl of Sheffield and Downes was bowing pleasantly enough and introducing the lovely

Frenchwoman who accompanied him. The marquis's eyes brightened. He had a distinct

tenderness for all things French and this young lady, he saw at a glance, was as distinguished as

his own wife and far more beautiful. So Alex walked forward without Daphne, who was laughing

kindly at the marquis's rather worn jokes. It was pleasant to hear her own language at least.

People had no idea how difficult it was to set up a flirtation in a foreign tongue, especially one as

graceless and unnuanced as English.

As Alex slipped between chairs there was a sudden flurry at the front of the box. Sophie York

rose with a twirl of flimsy skirts, laughing up at the four men surrounding her, each of whom had

attempted to help her stand.

"Now!" she said gaily. "We are going to take some air. You" - she emphasized her choices with a

tiny rap of her closed fan - "you, and you. Will you accompany me?" The three beaux she had

chosen stumbled over themselves to clear a path through the chairs scattered around the box. As

Sophie passed Alex she raised her head, nodding a greeting.

"My lord," she said demurely. He could swear that the small smile trembling on her lips was a

conspiratorial one. An answering gleam lit his eyes.

Sophie continued out of the box, a little startled despite herself at Alex's sensual appeal.

Charlotte was lucky, she thought almost wistfully. Then she emerged from the corridor, causing

something of a riot, and all thought of Charlotte flew from her mind.

With one eye Alex noted that Will was talking quietly to the

young woman sitting beside him,

rather than hanging over Charlotte's bosom. He cast a minatory glance at the young bravo who

had his hand on the back of the chair Sophie had just vacated, about to sit down, and the man

snatched his hand back as if the chair burned, sinking his red ears into a high starched collar.

Alex smiled at him kindly and sat down himself. For a moment Charlotte didn't turn her head.

She knew, of course, that he was there. She knew the minute he entered the box.

Alex stretched out his long legs, ignoring the loud reaction of those theater patrons who had not

left their seats, hoping to see precisely something like this. Lady Charlotte Daicheston and the

Earl of Sheffield and Downes, seated side by side! Sarah Prestlefield, who had just entered the,

Brandenburg box to greet her dear friend Eloise, felt a glow of satisfaction. This was such an

interesting tangle. The only shame, thought her scandal-loving soul, was that Charlotte's parents

weren't at the theater. She would love to see the so-calm Adelaide put out by her daughter's

obvious penchant for the Ineligible Earl, as everyone was calling him.

Finally Charlotte could not pretend to be listening intently to the flimflam of the young man on

her right any longer. She turned to Alex, an involuntary smile lighting her eyes.

"My lord."

"Lady Charlotte."

There was a small pause. Alex wanted, very badly, to lean over and kiss Charlotte's neck. Then

he would pull her to her feet, walk to his carriage, and rip that bit of muslin she called a dress

right off her. His eyes darkened and he felt himself growing hard. Damnation.

"What do you think of the play?" he asked, nodding toward the now empty stage.

Charlotte considered his question. "I liked the first two acts very much, but the third act was

flimsy. . . . Would a mad king really wander about the moors with only his fool? And why did

that monkey suddenly appear?" "Yes, the monkey." Alex scowled. "Didn't you read Shakespeare

at school?" he asked.

"Of course. But there were many plays they wouldn't allow us to read, and then there were always

blacked-out parts in the plays we were allowed to read."

"Blacked-out parts? What about this one?" "We didn't get to read Lear at all. Although I'm not

sure why. It seems lighthearted enough, too light."

"Lighthearted! The third act is supposed to be bitter . . . terrifying. Do you remember when the

king sang a little jig about being mad as the wind and the snow?" "I didn't like it."

"Those lines are supposed to be howled, not sung - brilliant lines, spoken by a man who is

howling mad: mad as the wind and the snow."

Charlotte considered this in silence. "The verse too ... it hops and leaps," she said. "For instance,

the king's speech about old age was brilliant, but then that man, what is his name? Reginald - he

seems to be speaking prose, not verse."

Alex shuddered. "That's because Reginald is an adornment that this ass of a stage manager

decided to give to Shakespeare's play.

There's no Reginald in the original."

"How lucky you are," Charlotte said regretfully. "We were forbidden to read so much."

"Well, couldn't you read the plays now?" Alex could never figure out what gently bred ladies did

all day long. Men took care of investments and met their estate managers and gave speeches in

Parliament, as well as boxing, gambling, and wenching. But what did women do? He

remembered his mother counting the linen and carrying around food to the poor, but that was it.

"Oh, no," Charlotte replied absently. "I work in the mornings and I never seem to have time for

reading these days."

"You work?" Charlotte caught herself. She never talked with men about painting; they

immediately fancied her as a water-colorist, painting sweet little wreaths of flowers onto paper

bags.

Charlotte looked up into Alex's face, a hint of a smile glimmering in her eyes. "Do you know that

they wouldn't even let us read all of Romeo and Juliet?" Alex cast his mind back. They hadn't

acted the play at school; he couldn't think of anything offhand that might need censoring.

Charlotte continued. "My friend Julia Brentorton - she's now married and lives abroad - figured

out that they excised precisely ten lines, all from Juliet's epithalamium, you know, her soliloquy

before Romeo climbs up the rope ladder to her window."

"Of course!" Alex said, startled. "For he shall lie upon me like snow on a raven's back, like day

on night. ..."

Charlotte colored. She would look like snow if she lay on top of Alex's chest; his skin was the

color of dark honey. She jerked her thoughts away.

Alex was more interested in Charlotte's mention of work. "What kind of work?" he asked

bluntly.

Luckily at that moment Sophie reappeared, followed by a flock of admirers.

"Charlotte, dearest," she said in her half-laughing, mischievous tone that drove all the men

behind her mad with desire, "this play is simply not Shakespeare, is it? But Lord Winkle has a

delightful suggestion . . . that we eschew the second half and go to Vauxhall instead."

"Oh," Charlotte said rather stupidly, her eyes instinctively meeting Alex's. What she met there

made her feel feverish. She knew without question that her mother would forbid an excursion to

Vauxhall in company with the earl. Vauxhall had far too many dimly lit pathways and shadowy

arbors.

"What does your mother say?" she finally asked, looking up at Sophie.

"She doesn't like it, but she has agreed." Sophie bent over, ringlets brushing Alex's cheek. "I

think my father fancies that he has an amour with Miss Boch," she said softly, "and my mother

would like to leave the theater."

Charlotte rose immediately. She felt as if she had been ridiculously naive before the conversation

with her mother. It would never have occurred to her that the marquis might try to fix an interest

with a young lady, even if she were French. She never would have given a second thought to a

lively conversation between them, or guessed that the marchioness might dislike watching her

husband laugh genially at Daphne's French witticisms.

Will looked questioningly at Chloe van Stork, who had watched all the traipsing around the box

with rather wide eyes. She looked at him quickly and then down at her hands. Will thought he

would rather like to lure Chloe into a dark avenue and kiss her again. He thought of her soft lips

under his.

"Shall we join them?" he asked, his tone smooth as honey.

"Vauxhall," Chloe said. "My mother would not like it."

But when Chloe appeared at the van Stork's box, flanked by her huge blond cavalier, her mother

surprised herself by nodding agreeably. Katryn cast a loving look at her serious daughter. There

was pink in Chloe's cheeks and her eyes were shining. She had watched Chloe in the

Brandenburg box and felt a little guilty. Chloe looked like a crow, surrounded by gaily fluttering

gowns.

Perhaps she was too prudish in her notions of dress. She certainly didn't want Chloe to marry one

of the solid, plump Dutchmen who thronged into her husband's workrooms. While this Lord

Holland was undoubtedly a fortune hunter, her shrewd assessment was that he was also an

honorable man. And she was starting to think that he and her daughter might even make a

genuine marriage.

"Will you be properly chaperoned?" Will explained that the

Marquis and Marchioness of

Brandenburg would accompany the party.

"Yes, go, daughter," she said, and nodded at the baron. He bowed politely to Chloe's abstracted

father. Her father was properly dressed, an elegant evening coat straining across his plump

stomach, but he looked distracted, as if he was thinking of his work.

"Ah, humph," her father said in farewell.

A small smile lit Chloe's eyes and she dropped a kiss on his bald head. She put her hand on Lord

Holland's arm, ignoring the secret tingle that she felt at his touch. She felt as if she were in some

kind of dream. What was she, plain Chloe van Stork, doing at Vauxhall with Charlotte

Daicheston? In the last months the gossip columns had anxiously chronicled every move Lady

Charlotte made. She knew with absolute certainty that her own name would appear in *The Tatler*

tomorrow morning. Chloe shivered a bit with excitement and looked up at Will Holland.

His bright blue eyes looked almost black ... it must be the lighting in the corridor, Chloe thought.

He drew her quickly down the stairs and toward the carriages. Finally she was almost running to

keep up.

"Sir," she gasped, pulling him back slightly.

Will turned his head, completely surprised. He was feverishly thinking of getting Chloe into the

carriage and kissing her again; he didn't remember ever being so obsessed that he forgot the

normal social graces.

"I apologize," he said. And then it just came out of his mouth: "I

wanted to kiss you again, in my carriage."

Chloe's eyes widened. She knew that Will Holland was courting her only for her money. Why on

earth was he so eager to kiss her? It must be part of his courtship routine. Will felt her

infinitesimal withdrawal and cursed inside. He tucked her hand back into the crook of his arm.

"I'll tell you what," he said firmly. "We will amble toward the carriages and I won't touch a hair

of your head: how's that?" He turned rather anxiously to look down into her blue eyes.

But she surprised him again. Chloe's eyes were dancing, unmistakably enjoying his discomfort.

"I should enjoy that," she replied.

Will looked ahead again. Enjoy what? What would she enjoy? Ambling? Or him not touching

her? He drew her hand closer to his side and consciously controlled his walk. Chloe smiled to

herself. They proceeded toward the carriages at a snail's pace.

Chapter 8 By the time all the carriages met at Vauxhall and the group had reassembled and found

each other, they were around twenty persons. Charlotte felt a moment of annoyance. She hated

large parties where you never got to talk to anyone seriously and you spent all your time shouting

over someone's shoulder. Besides, Alex was behaving in a most offhand manner, strolling on

ahead with a group of men. The men had all lit cigars and were talking loudly of a boxing match

scheduled for the coming week. She found herself next to Chloe van Stork, walking toward the

brightly lit pavilion. Charlotte studied Chloe's profile again and felt a quickening of interest. Yes:

This was the person she wanted to paint next. Chloe was very beautiful, even though she didn't

know it, but more interesting was the painfully honest look she had. As if she would always blurt

the truth and would never gain the smooth social apparatus that Sophie was probably born with

and which she herself had painfully acquired in the last three years.

"Miss van Stork," she said.

"Yes, my lady," Chloe replied.

Oh dear, Charlotte thought. "Please do call me Charlotte," she said. "Why don't we sit over

here?" She steered Chloe toward a large table, away from the smaller table where a group of

beaux were already clustered, looking expectantly at Charlotte.

Chloe sat down, wondering where in the world Will had gone. He had behaved (to her secret

disappointment) like a consummate gentleman in the carriage, and then she seemed to lose him

on the walk. The party itself was also unexceptionally proper. The marquis appeared to be a little

drunk to her inexperienced eye, and the marchioness frigid with annoyance, but there was

nothing remarkable in that. She had noticed that ton marriages seemed invariably strained.

Probably, she thought, it was all that alcohol they drank. It fuddled your brain, her mother said.

Lady Charlotte seemed to be staring at her in a very peculiar way. Probably she was entranced by

the novel idea of sitting with a bourgeois cit. Chloe raised her stubborn little chin.

"Why are you regarding me so ... intently, Lady Charlotte?" Charlotte's face glowed. "That's it!

That's exactly the look I want!" Chloe looked confused. The woman must be mad as a hatter.

How odd that the papers hadn't mentioned it.

"No, no," Charlotte said hastily. "I'm not making any sense, am I? I paint, you see. I've just

started painting people - well, I have painted Sophie, that's all. And I'd like to paint you." She

paused. Chloe van Stork was looking at her doubtfully.

Charlotte gave her a deliberately charming smile. Unlike Will, Chloe didn't unbend an inch.

Charlotte leaned across the table. "I don't dabble with paints." She broke off. "May I call you

Chloe?" Chloe nodded silently.

"I really paint. And I work at it like the devil," she said frankly. "I'd like to paint your portrait, in

profile I think. Yes, that would be best." Charlotte narrowed her eyes, unconsciously chewing on

her lower lip. "Do you think that you could possibly sit for me? A portrait takes a long time,

about six weeks, but I wouldn't need you every day. I work from about eight in the morning to

one; any time you could give me would be wonderful."

Chloe was staggered. Everyone knew that society belles didn't do a single thing all day long.

They sat around and counted their pearls. She gulped rather gracelessly, staring at the elegant

woman on the other side of the table. She worked like the devil at painting? "I suppose so," she

finally replied, hesitating. "I would have to ask my mama."

"Of course. Perhaps she would like to accompany you? She probably wouldn't want to just sit in

my studio, but I know that my mama would much enjoy some company," Charlotte said,

recklessly ignoring the duchess's elaborately planned mornings.

Chloe tried to imagine her mother having a leisurely tea with the Duchess of Calverstill and

totally failed.

"I doubt it," she answered uncertainly. "She is frightfully busy, most of the time." Then she could

have bitten her tongue off with embarrassment. Charlotte's mother probably lay about on a

daybed most of the day. Charlotte might think she was being critical.

But an insult had never occurred to Charlotte, who had been trained to run a large household and

knew just what an enormous amount of work it was. "Yes," she said absently. She was still

staring at Chloe's face. She reached across the table and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Chloe's maid had pulled her hair ruthlessly into a tight circle of braids, but small ringlets were

starting to fall out.

From across the large vine-hung arbor scattered with tables Will saw Charlotte tuck up Chloe's

hair and he frowned. She wasn't planning to transform Chloe, was she? The way she herself

changed? He didn't like it. Chloe was Chloe, and he didn't want to see her in one of those flimsy

French gowns, leaving all the men free to gape at her bosom. He walked over and loomed behind

Chloe's chair, frowning at Charlotte.

"Miss van Stork," he said with deliberate formality. "Would you like to join me for a stroll? We

might look at the mechanical train."

Chloe sat perfectly still for a second. It really was ridiculous, the way her heart leaped into her

throat when she heard his voice. He was a fortune hunter, nothing more. She had read all about

his pursuit of Lady Charlotte, for example.

"All right," Chloe said coolly. She nodded at Charlotte, giving her a rather sweet smile, and

walked off with Will.

Charlotte watched them go, smiling slightly. She had no delusions about how long Will would be

a single man. He was well and truly caught, she thought. She shrugged a bit and met the brown

eyes of the young man seated to her right.

"Lady Charlotte," he said. "Would you like to take a walk with me?" Charlotte felt truly annoyed.

She disliked walking into shadowed passageways with strange young men. In her experience they

invariably tried to kiss you, certain that their masterful lips would conquer all resistance.

Vauxhall was surrounded by pleasure gardens and ivy-hung walks that were only dimly

illuminated by Chinese lanterns and strings of lights. Her eyes met Sophie's and Sophie twinkled

at her sympathetically. She herself was busy fending off three men with a similar mission.

Meanwhile the marquis had managed to talk Daphne Boch into going to see the fireworks, and

the marchioness was staring straight ahead, a pinched look about her mouth. Charlotte wanted to

go home. Alex was nowhere to be seen, and what was she doing with him anyway? Not that she

was with him, considering that he had sauntered off the moment they arrived. She felt cross,

humiliated, and rather tired.

The young brown-eyed gallant was standing next to her, politely holding out his arm. She looked

up at him appealingly. "My lord, I find that I am quite exhausted. Would you be so kind as to

escort me back to my home?" Happily enough, the Honorable Peter Daysland evidenced no sign

of libidinous fever at the idea of being alone in a carriage with Charlotte Daicheston. He simply

nodded. Charlotte made her apologies to the tight-lipped marchioness. Sophie had disappeared

into the flower-scented night, escorted by all three bravos. Alex was nowhere. Charlotte put her

fingers lightly on Peter's arm and they walked off toward the carriages.

They were about halfway to the carriage park when a particularly lovely burst of fireworks lit up

the sky. Charlotte had been so busy trying to pick her way over the ill-lit brick walks without

stubbing her toes that she hadn't paid much attention. But now Peter Daysland said in a rather

boyish and charming way, "I say, Lady Charlotte! Just look at

that!" A scarlet serpent curled

around a large tiger lily, flaming for a moment and falling into broken pieces.

"Oh, how lovely," she said.

"My brother would love this," Peter commented, still watching sparkling fragments crumbling

into blackness.

"Why didn't he join us?" Charlotte asked. "Is he too young?" Peter colored and looked down at

his companion, worried that he was boring her. But she looked genuinely interested.

"Quill is my older brother - he hurt his leg in a riding accident," he said. "He has to stay in bed

all the time now, unless one of the footmen carries him outside. But it hurts quite a lot to be

moved and so . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Oh, dear," Charlotte said in a small voice. Here she was, fussing over a silly thing like her

ineligible beau deserting her, and this boy's brother was permanently bedridden. "You know, I

believe you can buy fireworks here. You could set them off in your back garden, and then if your

brother came to the window, he could see them as well."

"Oh, Lady Charlotte, that's a lovely idea," Peter exclaimed. "Do you know where the fireworks

are sold?" Charlotte nodded back toward the huge, lit-up pavilion they had walked away from. "I

believe they are back there."

Peter hesitated and then turned to go. "I will buy some tomorrow, Lady Charlotte, and I shall tell

my brother that it was your suggestion."

Charlotte laid a hand on his arm. "Oh, no! We have to do it tonight, don't you think? And

mightn't I help with the fireworks?" A sudden thought struck her. "I'm not sure that the

marchioness would wish to join us, however." She could not accompany any man to his house

without a chaperone, no matter how good the cause.

"My mother," Peter said with his appealing near stammer. "My mother would be happy to

chaperone us, I feel sure. I believe she knows your mother quite well."

Charlotte took this with a grain of salt. It was amazing how many members of the ton said they

knew her mother quite well; Adelaide had never been much good at repulsing people. Still . . .

Charlotte was struck with the determination to set off fireworks for Peter's injured brother.

"Let's go!" she said gaily. They started back toward the lit pavilion, walking rather less carefully.

A slight breeze set Charlotte's black ribbons dancing around her slender white dress. Alex, who

was standing at the edge of the pavilion, staring out in utter fury, recognized the gown in an

instant. His eyes narrowed, even as he felt a flash of happiness in his belly. God almighty, this

woman would probably drive him mad. Who was she with, out there in the dark, anyway? The

marchioness had told him that Charlotte had returned home; why was she returning? He had

pretended to himself that he was angry because she had left the party without saying good-bye to

all her friends. Inside he knew that he was furious because she didn't bother to say farewell to

him. He had gone to order a banquet of delicate sandwiches to be brought to their table, only to

return to find his girl (as he invariably thought of her in the last

week) gone, and all the rest of

them wandering around in the dark somewhere. Only the grim-faced marchioness was left,

staring into the darkness. He quickly found her a rum punch and was contemplating murder when

he saw Charlotte's billowing ribbons returning to the pavilion.

And now ... he was quite happy and didn't bother to analyze his change in mood. Alex strode out

in Charlotte's direction. My God, it really was dark out here. No wonder there were so many

thefts and rapes and what have you at Vauxhall. He felt a sudden flash of alarm and quickened

his stride. He had almost reached Charlotte and the young gentleman accompanying her. One

look at Peter, even in the dim light, reassured him. This one wasn't going to pull any fancy tricks

in the dark. Alex pulled to the side, pressing into the hedge. Charlotte and her escort walked on,

not even noticing him. Alex waited until Charlotte was almost past him and then he reached out

and caught one of her floating black ribbons, pulling it sharply back toward him.

She swung about fiercely, jerking the ribbon out of his hand. Her eyes flashed at him for an

instant until she recognized him, and then some other emotion touched her eyes ... he wasn't sure

what. He caught another ribbon.

"Sir," said the young gallant in a rather strained manner. "The lady would prefer that you not

touch her garments."

"Do you, Charlotte?" Alex said, gently pulling the ribbon toward him. Charlotte perforce walked

a step closer to him. "Do you prefer that I don't touch your . . .

garments?" Charlotte raised her

chin, meeting his eyes. "Certainly, my lord. I am not certain but that you have damaged my gown

already."

Alex's eyes smoldered down at her. He tugged a bit more on her ribbon, and Charlotte stepped

forward again. There was only a hairsbreadth between them now. Peter, standing behind

Charlotte, couldn't see Alex's hands, so he let them slide from the ribbon and spread them wide

on her front, his fingers fitting snugly under the rise of her breasts. Charlotte drew in her breath,

sharply.

"I'm just checking for damage," he said with a lopsided grin.

Charlotte couldn't think of anything to say. "We're going to buy fireworks," she finally said,

retreating a step. "Mr. Dewland's brother is unable to leave his bed and we thought to buy some

fireworks and set them off in his garden."

Alex's eyes shifted from Charlotte's face to that of Peter Daysland, who was standing off to the

side, unsure what to make of the earl's antics.

Suddenly Peter's face looked familiar. "Is your brother Quill?" Alex demanded.

Peter nodded.

"What a fool I am," Alex said, looking thunderstruck. "I've known Quill for years," he explained

to Charlotte. "We were at school together. I was very sorry to hear of his accident."

Peter looked at the earl doubtfully but Alex continued, his tone brisk.

"Right you are!" Alex said, turning Charlotte around. "I think I know exactly where to buy

fireworks."

By a half an hour later, Alex had rounded up those fragments of the party that were round-upable.

Will seemed to have taken Miss van Stork home, leaving a message for Charlotte that Chloe

would wait on her at nine o'clock in the morning. Alex heard that in silence. Before the evening

was over he intended to know exactly what his beloved planned to do with a city miss at that

unfashionable hour in the morning. His two French friends had also gone home, Daphne

desperate to get away from the marquis's increasingly familiar commentary. And after hearing

their plans and receiving Peter's assurances that his mother would act as chaperone, the

marchioness bundled her husband into a carriage and took him home. A few gallants sniffed at

the idea of pleasing an invalid and wandered off into dark pathways to find a willing courtesan,

of whom there were many at Vauxhall. So Sophie and Charlotte, with a reduced contingent of

about three men, not including Alex and Peter Daysland, set off, bringing with them a perfectly

marvelous collection of fireworks.

When Alex found that the only fireworks officially sold were simple rockets, he threw his

peership around - backed by a noble number of coins - and ended up with one Mr. Glister, a

fireworks director at Vauxhall, and a few of his "spessial works," as he called them. "I'd as lief do

it myself," Mr. Glister kept explaining anxiously. "You might as well take a finger off as look at

these.

They'll take the nose right off your face."

It was only when the carriages pulled up in front of Peter's darkened house that Charlotte felt a

twinge of anxiety. She had been relieved to find that Peter lived in a respectable area, two houses

down from her great-aunt Margaret, as a matter of fact. But when Peter ushered them in his

mother greeted them cheerfully; it seemed that she and her husband, a viscount, were having a

game of chess in the library, and had sent most of the servants to bed. And Charlotte did fancy

she had seen Viscountess Daysland with her mother, so that was all right.

Mr. Glister disappeared into the garden to set up his "spessial works," and Charlotte happily

accepted the glass of champagne someone put in her hand. Ever since that disastrous night three

years ago, she hardly drank any alcohol. It hadn't taken long for her to figure out that the

lemonade she and Julia drank so enthusiastically had been laced with spirits. But now . . . She

measured Alex's large body leaning carelessly against the mantelpiece. Alex was listening to

Peter's father prose on about the extraordinary efforts of Bow Street Runners to catch tollhouse

thieves. Perhaps it was the champagne. Little fingers of excitement kept darting up her spine. She

was terribly glad that she hadn't gone home. And when Alex looked up and met her eyes she

couldn't stop herself from giving him an entirely intimate, shameless smile. Alex's eyebrows flew

up and he pushed himself into an upright position.

Viscount Daysland kept babbling on about the Runners. Alex let his eyes range suggestively over

his beloved's face. Her glorious mop of curls was even more disheveled than usual, the effect of

wind rather than art. She was heartbreakingly beautiful, with her arching eyebrows and huge

green eyes. He felt himself hardening in a way that was simply not acceptable, given the skintight

pantaloons that passed as fashionable evening wear. Still ... his eyes drifted lower to her soft

breasts, rising out of that white dress as if they were begging for kisses. God! This would never

do. He politely disengaged himself from Viscount Daysland and walked over to Charlotte. Her

own eyes hadn't strayed below his chest, although he damn well wanted them to. On the way he

picked up another glass of champagne. Alex stood a whisper's breath away from her, his eyes

glinting a dangerous, sensual message.

Charlotte felt a familiar heat creep up from her knees. Why did he do this to her? She had only to

be next to him and she wanted to do that again.

"Lady Charlotte," he said gravely. "Shall we ascertain how the redoubtable Mr. Glister is doing in

the garden?" She tensed. It was a moment of decision: Should she go into the gardens with him?

She looked about rather wildly, but no one seemed to be paying any attention. Then she caught

Sophie's eye and Sophie winked deliberately.

"Oh, Charlotte," she called across the room, her clear voice arching over the chatter. "Don't you

think someone should venture out and see what is happening? We cannot intrude on Lady

Dewland's hospitality too long."

Alex offered Charlotte his arm. Still she hesitated. What was he

going to do out there in the

dark? Hadn't she sworn to herself that she wouldn't go outdoors alone with him again? She did

want his kisses, the heavy, drugging feeling of desire that swept over her when his lips met hers.

But she didn't want to ...

"It's a beautiful night," she said, smiling back at Sophie. "Why don't we all go into the garden and

see if Mr. Glister could use some help?" Alex held out his arm. "Lady Charlotte?" And then,

quietly, "Coward!" Charlotte gasped, and looked up at him. His eyes were dark with desire but

there was an unspoken smile there as well.

She grinned back, feeling quite daring. "Sir, your penchant for the outdoors makes me justly

wary."

Alex responded to the grin, not to the words. What on earth was she talking about? So he kissed

her on a picnic - well, not that it mattered. She was absolutely right; his fingers were itching to

push down her gown and pull a rosy nipple into his mouth.

"Come on," he said almost roughly. They walked out into the night. The Dewlands' town house

had a large formal garden stretching behind it. Charlotte felt a little ashamed of her doubts about

Peter. The Dewlands were clearly an old and well-established branch of the nobility. Her sister

Violetta was so nimble about things like this. She could immediately place any member of the

ton, and discuss his or her antecedents and claims to nobility . . . but Charlotte had never

bothered to learn. She spent no time reading Burke's Peerage. How could she? It was extremely

difficult as it was to meld the life of a marriageable young woman with that of a part-time

painter. Her mother kept warning her that she would have trouble once she was married. "How

will you know how to organize a party going in to dine?" she had asked. Charlotte had thought

briefly of the boring shuffling and reshuffling that prefaced a dinner party, especially when a

sticky question of precedence came up. To be honest, the question of marriage had seemed so

remote that she would never be organizing her own dinner parties, so why worry? The whole

party flocked out of the large double doors leading from the drawing room to the garden. Alex

handed Charlotte the glass of champagne he carried in his hand. Charlotte heard Sophie squeal

with delight as the smell of roses drifted over the garden, her three gallants jostling in an attempt

to be the first to pick her a perfect rose. Alex led Charlotte to a perfectly unexceptional bench, in

clear view of Lady Dewland. She felt a tiny pulse of disappointment. Didn't he want to pull her

off into the darker paths leading to the back of the garden? Not that she would have permitted

such a thing, of course. She sipped her champagne and then bent her head back, feeling soft curls

brush the back of her neck. It was now so late that it was possible to see a few stars in the sky,

even given London's ever-present haziness.

"Did you read the piece in The Gazette about coal dust?" she asked suddenly. "The writer argued

that coal fires are not only obscuring the air, but actually making people ill, especially babies."

Alex looked down at her curiously. He hadn't thought that

society belles read anything but the

gossip pages.

"I thought he argued the case too strongly," he replied. "There's no scientific evidence linking

coal dust and mortality. I should think that many of those babies die of malnutrition."

"Why do they cough so much then?"

"They could have colds . . . pneumonia. I thought his point was interesting, but without better

information we could not ban coal fires as he proposed."

"But, Alex," Charlotte protested, not even realizing that she used his first name, "he said that

autopsies have found babies whose lungs are black inside!" "Well, then why are most of those

babies found only among the poor?" Alex rebutted. "They could have died from anything!" "You

know as well as I do that only the children of the very poor are autopsied." Charlotte was keeping

a tight rein on her temper.

She drank some more champagne.

"Yes, but I have seen very few babies among my friends who have a constant cough, as he was

describing. And if I had," Alex said, "I would take Pippa to the country immediately."

"That's just it," Charlotte explained patiently. "Children of nobility spend most of the year on

country estates. We're in London only for the season - half the year at the most. Whereas poor

children breathe this air all the time." She waved her hand at the sky. "I spend a lot of time

thinking about light," she said, "and you have no idea how different it is here than in the country.

It's hardly even light in the city." They lapsed into silence.

Alex looked down at Charlotte with a new respect. She had just argued him into a standstill. A

small frown creased his forehead.

Why did she spend a lot of time thinking about light? He'd bet she wasn't thinking about light at

the moment. Her head was thrown back, exposing a lovely white column of neck, and she had

her eyes closed. Just so would she look when she rode on top of him, her curls tossed back in

abandon. "What are you thinking?" he said, his voice roughened by that thought. He trailed a

finger down her forehead, over her small straight nose and stopped at her lips.

Charlotte opened her eyes. "The smell of roses," she said. "They smell so warm. Why should a

smell be hot or cold? But they smell warm."

Alex thought about this for a minute. "I suppose," he said rather doubtfully. "Hot chocolate

smells warm."

Charlotte laughed, a lovely, joyful sound, he thought. "That's not it! I was thinking of flowers.

Freesias smell cold, for example."

"Hmmm." Alex trailed his finger over her chin and down to her collarbone. He leaned closer and

took a loud sniff. "You smell ..." He paused provocatively. She giggled. He was so close that she

could feel his breath on her cheek. "You smell warm," he said finally.

"Very warm. Also faintly like orange blossoms."

"Very clever," Charlotte said approvingly.

"I met a girl once, in a garden, who smelled like lavender, and so far that has been my favorite

scent." He leaned so close that his lips were almost touching hers.

Then he gave another

exaggerated sniff. She giggled again. "I think ..." His lips were touching hers now, whisper-soft.

"I think that orange blossoms are my new preference."

Charlotte was trembling slightly. But Alex drew back. He couldn't kiss her here, in full view of

Viscountess Daysland, not to mention Sophie's band of gallants. In the moonlight his eyes were

black as , blacker than night, Charlotte thought. She felt like a hypnotized rabbit, unable to pull

her eyes away from his. Alex stood up and pulled her to her feet. He seemed to feel no such

weakness, she thought with a faint pulse of humiliation.

"Let's check how Mr. Glister is doing with the fireworks, shall we? Your mother will be

worrying about you soon."

Mr. Glister had set up camp at the bottom of the garden. "So as I won't show a burned patch," he

earnestly explained. "Because these here gardens are very nice, very nice indeed, and I wouldn't

want to show them any indignity, no."

The footman standing behind him rolled his eyes. Charlotte suppressed a smile. Alex had taken

her hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and while he talked to Mr. Glister about

the technical problems of setting up large fireworks without a platform, Charlotte simply relaxed

and thought about her hand in his. His hand was so large. Her fingers were trembling and she was

afraid he might notice, so she rubbed her thumb against the base of his wrist. He responded in a

most gratifying way, instantly tightening his grip even though his voice never faltered speaking to

Mr. Glistler. Charlotte, on the other hand, was unable to think of anything but his fingers, which

had started a slow, sensual massage of her hand. She tried to look pleasantly interested in the

fireworks, although in fact she didn't hear a word Mr. Glistler said.

Finally Mr. Glistler said, "Aye, sir, aye, it'll be just a wee bit of time now. Why don't you tell all

them up at the house to look out of their windows. And the wee sick bairn as well."

Alex tucked Charlotte's arm into his and smilingly turned her back toward the house. This was no

better, Charlotte thought frantically. He was holding her so tightly that she could feel the warmth

of his long body walking next to hers. She felt as if her body were on fire. How was she going to

disguise this? If he guessed, he would think she was a wanton tart. Ladies don't feel like this, she

knew that for certain. Her mother was not talking about the kind of raging desire Charlotte felt

when she mentioned marital pleasure.

Suddenly Alex paused. They were sheltered from sight, standing in a line of apple and plum trees

leading to the front gardens. He dropped her arm and simply stood next to her.

"Do you know," he said conversationally, "I don't think I can go back out there in the light for a

few minutes?" Charlotte looked up at him, her eyes confused.

"Why ever not?" Instinctively she swayed a little closer to him. He swiftly grabbed her wrists and

pushed her back, giving a bark of laughter. Charlotte felt consumed by embarrassment. He

thought she was a trollop. She swallowed hard.

Alex looked at her downcast head and cursed silently. Then he reached out and pulled her into

his arms. Why not? It's what he had wanted to do ever since he saw Charlotte that evening. Her

soft body melted into his. He could feel every curve, from the luscious weight of her breasts

pressing against his chest to the slim flatness of her waist. God. This was doing nothing for his

ability to rejoin the party.

"Charlotte," he whispered into her small ear. She was still holding her head down, but she must

be able to feel his body as clearly as he felt hers. But did she know what she felt? His tongue ran

around the delicate pink whirl of her ear and her whole body trembled in response. Alex let his

hands slide down her back.

"Charlotte," he said again, lingeringly. "Do you know what you are doing to me? I feel like some

kind of satyr from a classical play - the kind of play they never let you read in school." His hands

had reached that delicious spot in her back where her bottom swelled gently. "There was a good

reason for not reading those plays too. Satyrs are hairy, lusty beasts, after all, and there's no

telling what young women might think, reading about them." He couldn't help it; he pulled her

against his body again. "They might even run into the woods looking for them. ..." His tongue

traced a burning path down her neck. "Oh, God!" he said aloud, putting her away from him.

Charlotte looked up, totally bewildered. His eyes were black as ebony as he stood back, running

his hand through his hair. In the moonlight the silver gleamed coldly. Charlotte reached up and

touched a strand.

"Has your hair always been this color?" she asked.

"It turned this way when I was seventeen," Alex answered, staring down at Charlotte. Was she

untouched by the desire he felt? He grabbed her wrists, roughly. "Don't . . . don't look at my hair,

Charlotte."

She was looking at his hair because she felt too shy to meet his eyes. And when she did, what she

saw there made her feel dizzy with excitement. Alex smiled a little, to himself. His girl wasn't

unaffected, no. He was right about her. She would be wild in his bed and intelligent at his table.

He couldn't do better for a wife. She wasn't at all like Maria, although ... he looked closer. She

did have a triangular face, as did Maria, and her lower lip was wide and generous, just like

Maria's. But that means nothing, his mind hastily assured him. Hundreds of women have those

features.

Now he had to calm them both down so that he could saunter out there under the lanterns and tell

the party to expect fireworks. He moved farther back and leaned against a tree. He could tell she

had no idea what was going on.

"My lord," she said tentatively.

Alex crushed a pulse of disappointment. What had happened to "Alex"? "Shall we join the

others?" He stayed perfectly still, leaning easily against the apple tree. "I can't," he said simply.

She looked at him, her eyes wild with speculation.

He sighed inwardly. For one thing, this meant she probably had no idea why he was an ineligible

marriage partner. Her mother seemingly hadn't got around to explaining it to her yet. But he

didn't want to think about that particular problem.

"Charlotte," he said, his voice velvety smooth and deep. "Come here."

She looked at him and did nothing.

"Charlotte."

She walked over and stood just before him. Deliberately he reached out and put his hands against

her cheeks. Then he slowly allowed them to slide down her body, over the swelling mounds of

her breasts, down to her slim waist, right down to her thighs ... as far as he could go without

stooping. She shivered and he saw her tongue nervously touch her lips, but she didn't move.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, finally.

"Because it was fair," he answered obscurely. "Now" - he took her hands in his and placed them

on his cheeks - "you do the same."

Charlotte stared at him, her green eyes large. She won't do it, he thought. She's a gently bred lady,

for God's sake. She's probably about to run back to the house screaming. But there was

something scornful about his look that steeled Charlotte's backbone. Just as deliberately as he

had, she drew her hands down over his cheeks. They were prickly with a growing beard, his face

shadowed by small hairs. Her fingers drew slowly over the tiny hairs' sharp edges; she wondered

what they would feel like against her lips.

Watching her, Alex felt himself growing even harder, if that was possible. This was a great idea,

he thought, remaining absolutely still.

Charlotte's fingers trailed down, down the strong brown column of his neck, down over muscled

shoulders and chest. Then she pulled her hands away.

"Oh, no," Alex said in a curiously deep voice, recapturing her hands and returning them to his

chest. "You have to keep going."

Charlotte blushed. He kept his hands on her wrists, flattening her hands against him, and slowly,

slowly drew them down his body.

Charlotte felt herself flushing scarlet. Her heart was racing. When he reached his crotch, he

stopped. Charlotte gasped. Under her right hand was a huge, swollen ... It pulsed slightly against

the palm of her hand. Alex looked down at her, his eyes an enigmatic black in the moonlight. She

pulled her hands away from his, turning away. As she was about to run back to the house Alex

grabbed her shoulders from the back, pulling her against his chest.

His lips were warm on the back of her neck. "You see," he said so softly that his breath hardly

lifted the tendrils of hair on her neck.

"You are driving me around the bend." He punctuated each word with a kiss. "I don't remember

ever feeling this . . . mad."

Despite her embarrassment, Charlotte felt a little smile lurking at the edge of her lips. She

relaxed against him. He crossed his arms over her chest and rested his chin on the top of her

head.

"Alas," he said with mock seriousness. "Even this prudent embrace is not going to help me. Why

don't you go warn the group that the fireworks will arrive soon? I

shall make my way back to Mr.

Glister and offer him some more help."

He didn't say it, but obviously if he stayed with Mr. Glister it provided an alibi for their time in

the fruit arbor, Charlotte thought. Her heart felt curiously light. She skipped forward, out of his

arms, and turned around. Alex looked like an enormous dark shadow, leaning against the tree.

She took a step, leaned forward, and pressed her lips against his.

"I knew that all those classical plays had much to offer," she said softly against his lips. "I could

become quite interested in reading . . . about satyrs, for example." She turned in a flurry of black

ribbons and half flew back to the lights of the house.

Alex cursed again, out loud this time. Damn but these pantaloons were uncomfortable! He

grinned and strode back toward Mr.

Glister. She was his now. Tomorrow he would go to her father and tell him so.

Thirty minutes later Alex loomed up at Charlotte's left shoulder as glorious bursts of light

cracked and scattered, drifting with the wind in drops of green and gold light. His hands rested

lightly on her shoulders and he pulled her back against him. Charlotte snuggled there, feeling

curiously content after all the fierce emotion of the past few hours. Up at the window a lean

white face watched as a red poppy formed and seemed about to be eaten by a rearing stallion.

Sophie, standing in the circle of her three gallants, peeked at Charlotte. She looked so happy, so

glowing. Sophie hoped the viscountess didn't notice Alex's hands on Charlotte's shoulders.

For her part, Charlotte was content just to lean against Alex. She didn't give a thought to

Viscountess Daysland, or the footmen, or anyone else who might see them. She had just

discovered that her bottom was snug against the top of Alex's legs, and although there had been

nothing disturbing there a minute ago, even as the poppy flew into a hundred brilliant scarlet

sparks she felt . . .

well, she felt. She grinned happily.

The next morning Chloe van Stork sat up straight in bed at seven o'clock and rang her bell

vigorously. Today she was going to begin sitting for her portrait! After her bath she looked

dubiously at the row of drab gowns hanging in her wardrobe. Finally she chose a simple white

morning dress. Probably it didn't matter anyway. Her school friend Sissy had her portrait

painted in costume, as Cleopatra. And when Chloe admired it Sissy told her that the costume

didn't really exist, and her mama would never allow her to wear something like it until she was

married. Chloe had stared at the gold snake curled around Sissy's waist, whose head ended

somewhere just under her right breast, and heartily agreed with Sissy's mama, although she

would never have said so.

"Well, miss, so you will not be helping us finish the collar bands today?" her mother said

ponderously. But Chloe could tell she was pleased. After all, why did Katryn send her daughter

off to an enormously expensive school if she didn't want her to move in high circles? In fact, her

mama was well near ecstatic, although she would never exhibit such an extreme emotion in front

of her husband, who emphatically disliked the idea of Chloe joining the aristocracy. But from the

moment Katryn van Stork realized that their only daughter was going to be very pretty, if not

beautiful, she had been planning and scheming for that very thing. So she beamed at her buttered

muffin and kept her mouth shut.

Just then their starchy footman entered the breakfast room and bowed. Mrs. van Stork jumped.

He moved like a snake, this Peter.

"Flowers for Miss van Stork," Peter intoned.

Just as if he were announcing a funeral, Katryn thought crossly.

Chloe's eyes widened. Peter was holding what appeared to be five or six bunches of violets, fresh

with dew. They looked as if they had been picked no more than ten minutes before. Peter paced

around the breakfast table while Chloe waited impatiently. He bowed again, at her chair, and she

finally snatched them from his hands.

Peter left the room, his eyes searching the ceiling for an answer to why he was working for a

wealthy cit instead of a great lord.

Because they pay more, he thought practically.

Chloe plucked the card from among the violets, her fingers trembling a little. Then she half

laughed in surprise. They weren't from Will - or Lord Holland, she hastily corrected herself.

Instead she was holding an elegantly printed card that read Charlotte Dacheston across the

bottom. Written in handwriting that looked almost male was a note: I am very much looking

forward to our appointment. Do let me know if another time would be more convenient.

And it was signed Charlotte, in a sprawling, confident hand.

"Who is it from?" barked her father from his end of the table.
"That jackanapes who ate here last

evening?" He had missed all the implications of Lord Holland's brief attendance of Lady

Charlotte at the theater, but he thought he knew the smell of a fortune hunter when he saw one.

Although he had to admit that the baron was a good deal more bearable than most of the

dissolute, useless aristocrats he saw wandering down the Strand. He seemed to know something

of commerce, for example, which is more than one could say of the majority of Tulips his

daughter met.

"No, Papa," Chloe said, her eyes dancing. "It is a note from Lady Charlotte Daicheston."

"Humph," her father said. "That woman's got herself into the papers again."

"Oh? May I see, Papa? That is, if you are quite finished."

"Finished? I don't read the gossip pages, miss!" His family tactfully ignored the issue of how he

knew about Charlotte Daicheston's presence in the papers as Chloe scanned the gossip pages.

"Oh, Mama," she gasped. "Apparently Charlotte and her friends arranged to have fireworks set

off for a poor sick man last night, after we left Vauxhall." Chloe didn't even notice her use of

Charlotte's first name, in her excitement. She read aloud the entire article, which was agreeably

detailed about exactly which fireworks had been shot off and the reactions of all concerned,

particularly the driver of a phaeton whose horses had been startled by the sudden blooming of a

large rearing horse in the sky. The driver's tart commentary was, however, treated as sour grapes

by the journalist, who finished by remarking how few people these days bother making kind

gestures toward the sick and invalid. Mrs. van Stork smiled hugely. She herself spent most of her

time making up clothing for London's poor population; Lady Charlotte promptly moved into an

honored place in the galaxy of those people she knew - or knew of - in London. Even Mr. van

Stork grunted approvingly after Chloe finished reading the article.

Just before leaving, Chloe pinned some of the violets to her white dress. She was going to

Charlotte's house . . . and perhaps, who knows? She might even see Will there. Unlike her father,

she had no illusions about what Charlotte's beckoning nod to Lord Holland had meant the night

before. Perhaps, she thought, gasping at her own temerity, they are lovers Chloe's common sense

intervened. It was unlikely. Charlotte was simply so beautiful that no man could resist her

summons. Well, Chloe thought, she would just have to hope that Charlotte turned her eyes away

from Will. It sounded from the gossip column as if Charlotte might marry the "Ineligible Earl,"

whoever that was. Her mother's lips had folded tight as a steel box when Chloe asked who he

might be and why he was ineligible.

She arrived at Calverstill House jittery with excitement. Perhaps Charlotte had changed her

mind? Why on earth would she want to paint Chloe anyway? Her

large eyes grew larger as she

was ushered into the entranceway of the Calverstill town house. She had visited houses of the

aristocracy, of course. Her friend Sissy Commonweal had invited her home for several vacation

breaks from school. But this house was different. The floor of the hallway seemed to be made of

four or five different colors of green marble, and the ceiling arched over her head in a wild

profusion of cupids and reclining gods. She was so overcome when the butler ushered her into an

elegant salon that she fixed her glance rigidly on the floor. Surely there must be some kind of

mistake! People who lived in houses like this didn't paint portraits. But then she heard slippers

running lightly downstairs and Charlotte Daicheston entered the room.

"I'm so glad you are here!" she said.

Chloe looked at her the way a drowning man looks at a lifeboat. She was incredibly beautiful, but

more than that, she was so warm.

Chloe rose to meet her, stumbling a bit.

"Are you certain - " "Of course I'm certain! I've been working for an hour or so already, getting

everything set up. Let me introduce you to my mama first."

Chloe paled. She hadn't thought about meeting grand personages such as a real duchess. But

Charlotte led her nimbly up the grand flight of stairs and off to the left.

"This is the morning room." Charlotte threw open a pair of delicate, tall doors. Chloe found

herself on the threshold of a pale gold chamber, hung with chintz curtains that swayed in the light

breeze. Sunshine was pouring in and the furniture was comfortable rather than elegant. Six or

seven women, some clearly servants, were seated around a large table, sewing. Charlotte's mother

rose and moved toward them. She was a surprisingly tall woman with a very sweet smile, who

took Chloe's hand and asked about her parents. Then she begged them to excuse her.

"We are trying to finish a score of boys' shirts that are desperately needed at Bellview

Orphanage," she said apologetically.

"Otherwise I would accompany you up to Charlotte's studio. But I am sure you will be fine." She

gave Chloe a distracted smile.

Chloe smiled back. "I left my mama finishing a set of shirts - for adults, not children."

"It is endless," Charlotte's mother said rather helplessly. "I feel as if we sew and sew, and

everywhere I see people wearing only rags."

Charlotte and Chloe curtsied and they continued up the stairs. The stairs got suddenly smaller and

steeper, going up to the next floor.

"This is really the nursery floor," Charlotte said over her shoulder. "But there aren't any children

now, obviously, and so my parents turned the nursery into my studio."

They paused in the door of a large room, painted white. All around the walls were candelabra,

large ones, small gilt fragile-looking ones, a pair covered with sea-shells. Chloe's mouth fell

open. There was a hideous, large candelabra designed to look like tree branches, and even one

that must have been in the original nursery because it depicted

Noah's Ark with candles sprouting
from several of the animals' heads.

"Oh," Charlotte laughed. "I completely forgot how odd this room
must look. You see, I need light

more than anything else. So we put up all the extra candelabra
we had in the attic, and then we

sent one of the footmen down to the Strand with instructions to
buy anything he could find. And

this was the result."

Chloe looked around slowly. The lights had been affixed to the
walls every foot or so, and each

one had stark white candles in its holders.

"The footmen put in new candles every morning," Charlotte
continued. "I get hideously irritable

when they burn down, because if one goes out it changes the
light, and finally Mrs.

Simpkin - our housekeeper - decided that the candles burn first
here. They are changed every

morning and then they go into other rooms, like the
bedchambers. London is so dark with coal

dust that I can work only until around eleven o'clock in the
morning with natural light, and often

not even then."

Chloe nodded. She had never seen so many wax candles in one
room. Her mother was no

nip-cheese, as she said, but even so they used wax sparingly and
tallow dips in all the bedrooms.

She walked slowly into the room. Posed before a large set of
windows was an easel. When she

walked around and stood in front of it she was transfixed. The
picture was a laughing version of

the young woman, Lady Sophie York, whom she had met the
night before at the theater. Sophie

was so alive, as if she might dash off the canvas. She didn't look at all dreamy or posed, like the

portraits exhibited in the Royal Portrait Gallery each year.

"I brought it out," Charlotte said, "so you could see my work. Ah, do you like it?" Chloe's little

face was like a barometer, Charlotte thought. You could see each expression register clearly. At

the moment she looked appalled, hopefully not because of the painting.

Chloe turned her head quickly. Charlotte actually sounded a bit anxious! "It's splendid," she said

stumblingly. "But . . . why would you want to paint me? She's so da2zling, and I am quite

ordinary."

"That's nonsense, of course," Charlotte replied. "You are very lovely, as you probably know. But

that doesn't matter. If you hadn't agreed, I was thinking of painting Campion, our butler. What I

want is a look, not a face. See - if you look at Sophie here, what I tried to do was catch Sophie

herself, not just a beautiful set of features."

Chloe looked hard at the painting. "Oh," she finally said. "She's very, um, alluring, isn't she?"

Charlotte beamed. "Yes. And that's Sophie too, in person."

Chloe thought about the hungry eyes of the men surrounding Sophie York the night before.

"Yes," she said. "But there's something more. . . ."

"It's a joke to her," Charlotte said. "She is provocative, but not really seductive. What I mean is,

she's untouched, herself." Charlotte strongly wondered if she should be so explicit with a young,

chaste girl. But Chloe was only the third person to see the painting, not counting Sophie, and the

first who had bothered to ask her anything about it.

"I see," Chloe said slowly. "It's around the mouth, isn't it? She looks - well, like the goddess

Diana. Not that I know what Diana looks like," she added in some confusion. "But as a goddess,

she's supposed to be incredibly beautiful, but rejected all men, isn't that right?" "I never thought,"

Charlotte replied with interest. "I'm not sure I'd agree ... I thought of the picture more as someone

who plays with fire she doesn't understand - " "Ah," Chloe said. Now she understood perfectly.

Only two days ago she would have unhesitatingly classed herself with Sophie, except she didn't

even play at being seductive. But last night an emotion she didn't know she had blazed into life

when Will Holland kissed her.

She turned back to Charlotte without saying anything, but Charlotte instantly realized that Chloe

was no demure, unawakened maiden. Chloe said so little that one was in danger of classifying

her as naive. Charlotte was growing more interested in this portrait every moment.

"What would you like me to do?" Chloe asked politely.

Charlotte led her over to a comfortable divan. "I should like you simply to sit. There is no need to

fix your head in one position, or not move. I am going to spend the next couple of hours making

a whole series of sketches of your head in profile and from the front. Then, as I told you last

night, I will work on it myself for a while, and hatch a plan. And then I will ask you to come back

for another sitting, probably next week."

Chloe sat down, feeling self-conscious. Charlotte quickly pulled a

huge chef's apron over her

head and sat down with a large pad of paper in her lap. She started sketching, the quick, sure

movements of her wrist the only thing Chloe could see. At first Charlotte asked her a few

questions, but Chloe could see that she didn't really want to talk. So Chloe fell easily into silence

and started thinking about Will. Will last night ... in the corridor ... in the carriage, in front of her

house.

Charlotte's hand trembled. What in God's name was happening to Chloe? The self-contained,

earnest little girl she'd met the night before had transformed into a passionate woman, glowing at

every pore with sexual interest. Could it be that she, Charlotte, was the naive one? She simply

didn't see the world as it was until Alex came along and . . . Charlotte scowled violently. She

wasn't sure she liked this new world, full of roving husbands and maidens feverish with desire.

But - perhaps it was Charlotte who was feverish and she was writing the emotion onto the face

of a sedate little Dutch maiden? Charlotte looked down at the sketch in her lap, and at the

sheaves

that had fallen like snow around her chair. No. Her pencil didn't lie. It never had. The thought

steadied her and she began sketching faster, trying to capture Chloe's restraint, the quality of

extreme self-control that was so fascinatingly balanced by glowing sensuality.

Charlotte had fallen into a rhythm by an hour or so later. And she was getting somewhere. Bits of

certain sketches had something she wanted. She'd caught a look in Chloe's eyes, for example,

somewhere in a page on the floor. And she had a beautiful, calm chin and throat tossed off in

coal, not pencil, also drifting about the floor. The portrait was beginning to tumble itself together

in her head, when there was a sudden interruption. A sharp knock sounded on the door of the

studio.

"What the devil." Charlotte said in a completely unladylike manner, jumping to her feet.

Chloe's mouth fell open for the second time since she entered the studio. She had never heard a

lady swear like that.

Charlotte was furious. Chloe had relaxed only about ten minutes ago. Her shoulders had been

strained and unnatural for forty minutes. Everyone knew not to enter this room during working

hours.

A large dark hand gripped the door and swung it open. As soon as Charlotte heard a voice telling

Campion that no, he wouldn't wait and be damned with him, her heart flip-flopped. It was Alex,

genially dismissing Campion's protests. He must have followed the butler right up the stairs,

because normally Campion would never have permitted an unchaperoned man to enter the upper

floors of the house.

Charlotte straightened her back, her mouth tight, as Alex entered the room. She was ready to give

him the lecture of his life when she reaped he wasn't alone. In front of him trotted Pippa, her

plump legs moving her surely toward the lovely heaps of paper

she spied in front of her.

"Stop her!" Charlotte shrieked. Alex managed to catch the big, starched bow on the back of

Pippa's dress as she was about to dive into a pile of paper. Charlotte ran about, gathering papers

while Alex held back his howling daughter.

Chloe rose from the couch. "How do you do, my lord?" she said in her quiet way. "You met me

last night; I am Chloe van Stork."

"I remember," Alex said, smiling warmly. "Are you having your portrait painted?" He had

instantly grasped the connotations of the candelabra and the easel.

"Well, not yet," Chloe replied. "Lady Charlotte is still making sketches."

"Oh, please!" Charlotte said. "Do call me Charlotte."

She was still picking up paper, watching Pippa out of the corner of her eye. She wouldn't put it

past Alex to let go of his daughter.

She finally managed to gather all the sketches together and place them securely on the

mantelpiece, weighed down by a candlestick. Meanwhile Alex, carrying Pippa, who was

squealing, although a bit more quietly, walked around to see Charlotte's easel. Charlotte couldn't

help watching him out of the corner of her eye.

He stood absolutely still. His only movement was to drop Pippa gently to the ground. She

immediately scooted off and started trying to climb a chair. Still he stood. Charlotte was feeling

more and more peevish. Perhaps he couldn't even think of a pleasant compliment. Finally he

raised his head and looked straight into her eyes.

"Why bluebells?" "Why . . . what do you mean?" Charlotte responded confusedly.

"Why bluebells - why not rabbits?" His mouth quirked. He walked over to her. "You are going to

keep that picture until Sophie marries, aren't you? I can't see it joining the stodgy members of the

Brandenburg portrait gallery, somehow. So rabbits - fertility."

"Rabbits, fertility," Charlotte repeated stupidly.

Chloe cleared her throat gently. "It's an Italian custom, isn't it, my lord? In the Renaissance,

Italian brides were given pictures of themselves with rabbits playing in the background."

Charlotte smiled involuntarily. He got it! Her portrait was precisely a bride picture: a woman on

the cusp of learning something.

Alex's huge hands grasped her shoulders.

"Your portrait is quite splendid. You know that, don't you?" She looked up at him without

responding.

I wonder why he's called ineligible, Chloe thought to herself, watching the lithe, beautiful couple.

They were standing very close to each other, and from what she could see of Alex's face, he was

within a hairsbreadth of pulling Charlotte into his arms. Chloe felt suddenly embarrassed. The

naked passion on Alex's face made her own face feel hot. She turned away.

"We have to go to Italy," Alex said without pausing. "We'll go to Florence and see the Leonardo

portraits . . . and Rome, the Michelangelos - " Chloe wouldn't have been so embarrassed if she

could have seen Charlotte's face. Even as Alex listed the places Charlotte most wanted to visit in

the whole world, her irritation grew. She woke up cross this morning, aching inside for

something unknown. And with Charlotte's annoyance grew the conviction that she would not

marry Alex. What she felt for him was raw sexual desire; obviously that was not an emotion that

a lady cultivated, let alone married someone for. In fact, she had thought with satisfaction of the

moment when Alex would ask her to marry him again, and she would politely, but coolly, refuse

him. And now he was simply assuming that she would marry him! The gross arrogance of it

galled her to the quick. Her face darkened even more.

Alex was no fool. He broke off his list of Italian cities and stared at her.

Charlotte opened her mouth and then closed it again. She could not tell him exactly what she

thought of him and his assumptions in front of Chloe and Pippa. Besides, she had been aware for

some time that Pippa was precariously perched on the settee, trying to throw her fat little leg over

the back. From there she would certainly fall down and hurt herself. So she simply turned about

and swept Pippa off the settee.

Pippa opened her mouth to scream and then settled.

Charlotte smiled at her hugely. She might not like her papa, but she certainly liked this small,

independent spirit.

"I'm the not-nanny, remember me?" Pippa gave her a small, cautious smile. Charlotte tucked her

into the crook of her arm, so she was sitting up and could see where they were going.

"Miss van Stork," she said courteously. "Since our sitting has been

interrupted, shall we join my

mother and take some tea?" Alex's heart sank. Not only was his love looking like a black

thundercloud and cross as a termagant, now she wanted to join her mama. And given what he

understood from the Duke of Calverstill this morning, the duchess was likely being talked into

the idea of meeting him at this very moment.

He cleared his throat. "Ah, your mother is busy."

Charlotte swung around. "And how, pray, would you know?" "Your father told me," Alex said,

rocking back on his heels and looking absolutely imperturbable.

Charlotte stared at him for a moment in frustration. What was going on here? Suddenly the light

dawned. Alex must have met her father and asked for her hand in marriage this morning. And

somehow he talked his way out of her father's absolute refusal of the idea. So now her father was

relaying whatever story Alex came up with to her mother. Charlotte threw Alex a brooding look.

"Hmmm," she said, nonplussed for a moment.

"I should leave now," Chloe interjected. She really didn't enjoy all this strained conversation,

especially as she had no idea what was going on. "My mother was very clear about the fact that

she needed me to return this morning."

Charlotte turned to her, her face falling. "Oh, but surely ..."

Alex intervened. He took Chloe's hand and smiled at her genially. "We all know what mamas are

like when they want you to return on time," he said. "I promise not to interrupt your next sitting

with Charlotte."

Chloe looked at him silently for a minute. My goodness, but this man was confident. She couldn't

deny his incredible attractiveness, but was there no chink in his assurance? Well, he is a man, and

a peer of the realm, and handsome, and rich, she thought with some resentment. Why should

there be? "Of course," she replied hastily, aware that she had been mute too long. Chloe

withdrew her hand and turned to Charlotte. Then she gave an involuntary smile. Perhaps the

earl's comeuppance was at hand. Charlotte looked as mutinous as a mule, in her mother's term.

Chloe smiled with genuine warmth, and curtsied to Charlotte.

"Oh, Lord," Charlotte said. "Here we are, curtsying and addressing each other formally. Are you

sure you want to do this, Miss van Stork? We're going to be locked up in this room with each

other for almost six weeks - you'll have to call me Charlotte."

Chloe twinkled at her. Little fits of temper didn't bother her, given that her father indulged in

them all the time. "Oh, no, Charlotte," she said, holding out her hand. "I am looking forward to

this portrait, even if I can't see it until I get married!" "Oh, I let Sophie see her portrait," Charlotte

said. "She just doesn't understand it yet. Her only comment was that she thought her teeth were

too large." They shook hands with total understanding.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, then," Charlotte said resignedly. "Let me show you out, please."

Charlotte went first, still holding Pippa, who laughed madly and tried to swipe all the pictures off

the wall as they descended. Chloe came next and Alex followed.

He was feeling rather vexed. Why was Charlotte glowering at

him? Surely she didn't think he

was playing fast and loose with her when he kissed her last night? Didn't she expect to marry

him? What kind of person did she think he was, anyway, some kind of castaway who would kiss

a girl - the way they kissed - and then brush her off? His first proposal two weeks ago, and her

rejection of it, didn't even enter his mind.

Charlotte saluted Chloe at the door and then turned around briskly. Without missing a step she

dumped Pippa into Alex's arms.

"She's wet."

"Oh," Alex replied. He made such a funny picture, an elegant gentleman holding a child whose

beautiful white dress was becoming more soggy by the moment, that Charlotte almost burst out

laughing. Only a hint of darkness about his eyes stopped her. Alex turned to Campion, who was

waiting patiently.

"Will you call Keating, my man, please?" "Certainly, my lord." Campion bowed deeply. "Would

you like me to bring the child downstairs?" The entire household was riveted with interest in the

Earl of Sheffield and Downes; Campion knew that Pippa would be eagerly welcomed by Mrs.

Simpkin and the other upper servants. Keating was being feasted royally at this very moment, he

had no doubt. There was no one in the house who didn't know that the earl had spent forty

minutes alone with the master in his study, and that they had emerged on most amiable terms.

And there wasn't a single lobcock too stupid to draw the right conclusion about what had

happened in that study.

"Yes, thank you," Alex said. He handed over Pippa, who miraculously didn't scream but just

patted Champion's face. Alex and Charlotte watched Champion carry Pippa off as if he bore wet

children around the house every day.

"She's a bit better," Alex said in a distracted tone. "She hasn't had a true howl in two days."

"Yes, well," Charlotte said. Just like the rest of the household, she knew exactly why he was

here, and she didn't want any part of it.

Not now. Not when she still had the residual headache she'd had all day. Not when she was

feeling so cross and prickly that she might burst into tears. She just couldn't - wouldn't - cope

with another marriage proposal at the moment.

So, rather than walking into the Blue Room, or one of the other salons off the entrance hall, she

held out her hand graciously.

"It was very nice of you to visit, my lord," she said loftily.

Alex walked over until he was standing just in front of Charlotte, casting an admonishing look at

the two footmen on attendance in the hallway. They instantly disguised the curiosity that decked

both their faces and stood poker-straight against the walls. Alex kept walking forward until

Charlotte receded a step and another step. He glanced at one footman, who quickly pulled open

the door to the Chinese Salon, as it was called. Alex briskly took Charlotte's arm in his hand,

swung her about, and walked her into the room.

The door swung to behind them with a quiet click.

Alex immediately dropped Charlotte's arm and turned around to face her. "What makes you think

I would leave my child to the mercy of that muffin-faced type you call your butler?" he said,

affably enough.

Charlotte stared at him. She hadn't thought about the fact that she had tried to say good-bye to

him after seeing his child carried down into the servants' quarters.

"My lord," she said, "I am not ... fit for this conversation this

morning. I have a headache."

Charlotte dropped gracefully into a couch, feeling rather like a fraud, but also doing a good

imitation of her great-aunt Margaret. Margaret was invariably ill with something, and she much

enjoyed her own infirmities.

Alex stood before her, looking absolutely collected, Charlotte noted with some irritation.

"Perhaps you would like me to go down on my knees?" he asked. Charlotte saw the amusement

lighting his eyes and glared at him.

"No."

"Good," Alex said.

An undefinable suggestion of fury hung around him in a way that was making Charlotte most

uncomfortable. She raised her chin defiantly. No one could force her to marry, not even an earl of

the realm. Her head throbbed painfully.

"Perhaps you would like to commence now?" she asked defiantly.

Alex stared down at her. This wasn't going the way he pictured. He thought the interview with

her father would be the most difficult part of proposing to Charlotte Daicheston. He had dreaded

the explanations, the discussion of his first, horrible marriage - for God's sake, he never even

wrote his own father with the details. But the duke had been genial enough, listening carefully,

asking a few sage questions, nodding here and there. And at the end he shook hands with Alex

and said he had his blessing, and Alex had thought that was it. If he pictured anything, it was

Charlotte melting into his arms, madly grateful at the idea of becoming his wife.

Swaying toward him, the way she did last night. In fact, he had counseled himself not to allow

the whole proposal to get out of hand - he wasn't going to take his wife's virginity in a drawing

room! Somehow after the discovery of Maria's perfidy, and after finding out she had bedded

practically every man in Rome before turning eighteen, the idea of virginity and wedding nights

had become very important. No graceless coupling in coaches for him. Yet he thought that he and

Charlotte were so mutually fraught with desire that he even considered a special license. But

Charlotte's father had rejected that idea.

"It's going to have to be big," he had said shrewdly. "We'll have to put on the romantic wedding

of the century, in order to cool the gossip. And you" - he looked at Alex from under his bushy

eyebrows - "you'll have to make a baby as soon as possible."

Alex nodded. He had no worry about that. In all he and Maria probably made love only ten times,

and he had Pippa as a result.

But now - Charlotte was looking as testy as a cobbler with a sore head and he was losing all

inclination to ask anyone to marry him.

What did he need a wife for? Maria's screaming diatribes should have been enough to warn him

off women forever. And Pippa was doing better. . . . The silence between them grew and grew.

Alex looked down at Charlotte again. With a faint pulse of alarm, he realized that her face was as

white as her gown and she was leaning her head against her hand. He sat down next to her.

"You really do have a headache, don't you?" Charlotte nodded miserably. Each nod made her

head pound. Alex got up and went out into the hall. She heard him talking quietly to one of the

footmen.

"I've sent him off to tell Keating to make you a special brew," he said, reentering the room.

"Here - bend your head this way." He gently pulled her over until she toppled against his

shoulder.

Chapter Charlotte opened her eyes some twenty minutes later. Her headache was gone and she

had a delicious sense of warmth. Even her irritability had vanished. I'm drunk, she thought,

feeling her head reel slightly as she sat up. Alex was sleeping soundly. At least he didn't sleep

with his mouth open. At that moment he opened his eyes and stared at her wordlessly. A glimmer

of a smile lit her eyes. Still without saying anything he pulled her over against his side.

"Sleeping together," Alex finally said in a tone of mock disgust. "Just like two old men on a

bench in the sun."

"Would you like some tea?" Charlotte smiled. "Just to keep you awake, of course."

Alex hated the stuff. "Lapdog brew," he said. "Just the thing for an old gager like myself."

"Would you prefer sherry? Or something stronger? I suspect," Charlotte said primly, "that

Keating's special drink has made me tipsy, and so I shall drink some tea to ameliorate the

situation." She walked to the door and pushed it open. Cecil's face fell when he saw her. She

looked perfectly groomed and composed: The mistress had not been doing anything untoward in

that room. He trotted off to bring a tea tray.

Charlotte turned around. Alex was comfortably sprawled on a hideous Chinese settee chosen by

her mother at the height of the rage for things Oriental. The arms were sleeping lions, their eyes

picked out in red lacquer. But Alex ... he was beautiful, Charlotte thought with an inner sigh. He

was wearing an exquisitely cut coat of dove gray, which

contrasted ruthlessly with the untamed

masculinity breathing through his muscled thighs. Her resolution was weakening.

Alex raised his heavy-lidded eyes and said abruptly, "We need to talk." Charlotte nodded and sat

down next to him.

Upstairs the duchess was becoming worried. Surely her daughter had been unchaperoned far too

long. She walked quickly around her chamber a few times. At first she couldn't believe it when

Marcel told her he had reversed himself and now approved the match.

But when he detailed all the awful details of Alex's first marriage, she agreed. Adelaide sighed.

Now if only Charlotte could bring herself to discuss what had happened three years ago. . . .

Marcel walked into her bedchamber through the connecting doors leading to his own chambers.

"Time to go, dearest. We'll be late. You know that I hate to be late."

"Oh, Marcel." Adelaide turned an anguished face toward him. "We can't go anywhere. Why,

Charlotte and Alexander Fakes are still closeted in the Chinese Salon . . . don't you think we

should join them? They've been together, unchaperoned, for over forty-five minutes!" She

yanked on the bellpull vigorously.

"Nonsense," her husband replied. "Charlotte's a grown girl. She won't get up to any tricks.

Besides, Campion told me that she had a tea tray and a light lunch sent in. Does that sound like a

seduction to you? Now, it's time to go." He firmly swept his reluctant wife toward the door.

"But what will he think of me?" she wailed. "We can't simply leave them there unchaperoned!"

"Listen, Addie. You told Charlotte all about the reasons why I originally forbade the marriage, didn't you?" "Yes."

"Well, then, Alex obviously needs some time to explain about his first marriage and the annulment, and all the rest of it that I told you."

"Perhaps we should just say good-bye?" "Nonsense," Marcel said again. "We'll leave word with
Campion."

Marcel followed his wife down the stairs, ready to push her out the door if need be. He knew as

well as anyone that leaving his daughter unchaperoned would be considered a piece of great folly

in some circles. But he was playing a deep game, he thought proudly. Not for nothing was he

considered a wily poker player. He liked this earl. In fact, he liked him more than he had liked

any of Charlotte's other suitors. He fancied Alex had the right combination of strength and

intelligence to cope with Charlotte's painting and general stubbornness. But he shrewdly

reckoned that Alex had quite a job before him convincing Charlotte, and so he had told him,

straight out. Women didn't like to marry men with reputations of this sort. Now, if Alex had

a reputation for whoring and the like, he wouldn't see any problem. But a reputation for being a

limp lily - no. Charlotte had her pride, as much as the next woman.

Alex had listened to him silently, his black eyes inscrutable. But Marcel fancied his point had

sunk in. Now, what he, Marcel, would do in this situation would be to convince her. Yes,

convince her. And that might take a while, he thought with an inward grin. Under no

circumstances was Marcel going to let Addie bounce into the room and ruin the mood. Down in

the hallway he dismissed the footmen and told Campion to keep an eye on the place. (Campion

immediately understood the master's vague direction meant keep inquiring eyes away from the

door to the Chinese salon.) Then Marcel triumphantly bore his wife off to a musical luncheon.

Back in the Chinese Salon, Charlotte sat bolt upright beside Alex.

"Why don't you want to marry me?" he asked, finally. Startled, she swung her head to look at

him. He looked so handsome, and almost - could he be a little anxious? Charlotte's resolution

wavered again. But no. She marshaled her reasons: He really only wanted a nursemaid, and he

had forgotten their encounter three years ago. Which meant that he would be out propositioning

girls in gardens whenever she turned her back.

"Can't I just refuse?" "No," Alex said indomitably. "Not when you kiss me the way you do." A

faint blush crept up Charlotte's cheeks. Oh, God, he did think she was a shameless wanton. If she

mentioned what happened three years ago, he'd probably just walk out. Irrationally, she didn't

consider the difference between Alex walking out and her refusing his proposal.

A little silence fell.

"Let me guess," Alex said in a somewhat softer voice. "You heard the rumors about my being

incapable, and - " Charlotte shook her head frantically, eyes fixed on the couch cushion.

"You didn't hear the rumors, or that isn't the problem?" "I didn't ... I mean, I did hear, my mother

told me, but I knew. . . ." She bit her lip. She felt as if she must be crimson by now.

Alex gave a bark of laughter. "You knew," he said. "You're - remarkable, Charlotte." He reached

out a lazy finger and stroked her neck.

"Don't!" He withdrew his hand as if it had been burned. There was another silence. Then: "I'm

waiting, Charlotte." His tone was grim.

Charlotte raised her eyes to his, pleading for understanding. "I know what ton marriages are like,"

she said in a near whisper. "I don't want one like that. I - " She broke off suddenly as a brisk

knock heralded the entrance of a tea tray. Campion brought it himself, beaming avuncularly at

the couple as he deftly set up a small table.

"I have brought a small luncheon as well, Lady Charlotte. The duke and duchess asked me to

give you their regrets, my lord, and tell you that they had an unavoidable appointment. However,

they would very much like you to join them for dinner. If you need anything further, perhaps you

might summon me with the bellpull, as we have had to place the footmen elsewhere." Campion

bowed his way out of the room.

Very clever of the duke, Alex thought, instantly appreciating Marcel's hand in all this

unwarranted privacy that was being accorded to him and Charlotte.

Charlotte busied herself with the tea tray and tried to think what

it was she really wanted to say.

"Do you love me?" she asked bluntly.

"Love you?" Alex was completely startled. His first impulse was to say "Yes, of course," and

press a kiss on her lips. But he wanted this marriage to be different from his first, he reminded

himself. To begin without lies.

"No," he finally said, deliberately. Charlotte's body was rigid. "But, and this is a fair question,

Charlotte - do you love me?" Charlotte opened her mouth but Alex kept talking. "You see, I

don't think that love is something that happens the way writers pretend. All those lines like 'who

ever loved, who loved not at first sight' were made up by poets, not by real people. I thought I

loved my first wife the minute I saw her," he continued slowly, almost as if he was talking to

himself, Charlotte thought. "She looked so much like a girl I met before, here in England. She

looked innocent, beautiful . . . like a girl who had been living in a convent.

"So I told her I loved her, and she told me she loved me, and we married two weeks later to the

great rejoicing of her family. But do you know why they rejoiced so much?" Charlotte shook her

head.

"Because no one else in Rome would have married her." Charlotte just looked confused, so Alex

smiled at her, a lopsided, self-condemning smile. "She had slept with a good many of the Roman

gentlemen who danced at my wedding, you see."

Charlotte's eyes widened. Alex shrugged. "More fool I."

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said rather lamely.

"I thought a good deal about love at first sight in the following year. Our life together was hell.

She didn't love me, and I found out within a week or so that I didn't love her either. Love, I think,

is something built on trust - and trust comes only with time. Do you see what I mean?" Charlotte

nodded. She was having a hard time putting together Alex's turbulent black eyes, talking about

his wife's infidelity, and the fixed idea she had that he himself would be unfaithful once they

married.

"Do you believe," she half whispered, "that trust is a matter of ... of not being with other people

after marriage?" Alex nearly smiled. So Charlotte was thinking of adultery when she talked of a

ton marriage! Perhaps her father had a wandering eye.

"I think that fidelity between a man and woman is the only basis for marriage," he said firmly. He

took her hand and started a slow seductive massage of her palm. "I would never betray you with

anyone." He pulled her palm against his lips. "As a matter of fact, I don't think I would have

energy left for anyone else." Alex leaned closer, his breath warm on her cheek.

Charlotte pulled back again. "You told me that you were looking for a nursemaid," she said

weakly. Why did all her reasons seem so nonsensical now? She felt like an idiot.

Alex simply pulled her against his body, a strong hand pushing up her chin. "Do you think I want

to do this with a nursemaid?" His voice was oddly hoarse, Charlotte thought. She gulped and

shook her head like a mesmerized rabbit.

"Or this?" He bent his head and brushed his lips across hers. His lips caressed hers, slowly, enticingly, asking for something. . . .

Charlotte began to tremble.

"Was there anything else you wanted to say, Charlotte?" Alex asked, a little unsteadily. "Because

I don't mean to silence you." His breath is sweet, Charlotte thought.

"Are you sure you don't remember meeting me before?" she gasped, before the last rational

thought fled from her mind. Alex withdrew slightly and looked down at her.

"Sweetheart, I didn't ever meet you." His mouth swooped down on hers again. "How could I

forget this loveable forehead? Or your eyebrows?" He punctuated each phrase with a kiss.

"Or" - his voice was deepening into velvet - "your eyelashes? They lie so inky-black against

your cheek. Or your stubborn little nose?" Desperately, Charlotte pulled back. "Are you

absolutely sure?" Alex finally realized that the question was truly important to her. His eyes

searched hers. "I am quite certain," he confirmed. "I could never have forgotten you. As soon as I

saw you at the ball, I knew - " he broke off. But Charlotte guessed: He knew he wanted her.

He just didn't remember that he'd already had her. A single tear trailed down her cheek.

Alex brushed it away tenderly. "Does it matter, Charlotte? Really? Isn't the first time we met just

part and parcel of the myth of love at first sight? Why not pretend that you never met me before

the ball, and to hell with the past?" Oh, God, Charlotte thought despairingly. Another tear

followed the first.

Alex's eyebrows clamped together. What was going on here? Why did it matter when he met her?

He searched his memory again .

. . but he knew it wasn't any good. Before coming back from Italy he'd probably only been to

seven or eight ton parties in his life.

And Charlotte didn't even come out until the year he left for Italy. He stared down at her, his

body painfully aroused just by the sight of her, even when she was crying.

Charlotte made an effort to get ahold of herself. Think rationally, she told herself. Don't be a

widgeon! So he doesn't remember you.

He probably forgot all about making love at the masquerade ball because he thought the girl was

a trollop, and that's not the same thing as sleeping with a lady. But now he's saying that he won't

run around seducing women in gardens. He's promising. And adultery is what you were afraid of.

She gave a broken, tiny smile that lit Alex's heart. "I'm sorry to be such a wet goose," she said. "I

never cry!" "Aha!" Alex said. "You see, I am making the right decision. You will be a lovely

mother for Pippa, because that's the only thing she knows how to do well." Charlotte smiled.

"But Charlotte," Alex said seriously. "We need to sort this out. The fact is, darling, that you

undoubtedly met my brother Patrick. We look like a matched set

of pistols, my father always

said." And, in response to her questioning look, "all black with silver trim." Her smile peeked out

again. That's twice, Alex thought. "Our own nurse couldn't tell us apart . . . she used to complain

dreadfully when we would play tricks on her, which we did up to a few years ago. If Patrick were

here, in England, he would clear up the whole mess. But since he's not, we simply have to forget

it."

Charlotte nodded silently. Of course, he was absolutely wrong. She could never, never have

mistaken Alex's endearing dimple for anyone else's, or the bullish set of his shoulders, or the

arrogant way his eyebrows flew up. Those weren't even characteristics that were attached to one's

face. She had a painter's eye, and she looked past faces, at mannerisms, all the time. Maybe some

time after they were married she would feel more comfortable about mentioning something so

intimate. And then she could tell him and perhaps he would even laugh.

Alex sensed it as her body relaxed. He pulled her back into his arms, his hands ruffling her soft

curls.

"So, will you marry me?" he whispered against her neck. "Because I think I could easily love you

. . . and perhaps you will love me .

. . . and I can watch you paint, and we can even have another baby like Pippa, but with your lovely

mouth."

Charlotte nodded shakily against his shoulder.

Alex pushed her back, his eyes laughing down at her. "Did you say something?" "Yes," she said.

"Yes, yes, I will marry you."

"Ahhhh," Alex said, seizing her again. "Now you are my fiancée: Do you know what that

means?" Charlotte shivered. Was he thinking of doing something here? Here, in her mother's

Chinese salon? His lips were tracing a pattern down her neck that made her feel short of breath.

Meanwhile his hands slid from her neck down her back, making her body instinctively bend

toward his. Their knees knocked together awkwardly and Charlotte giggled. Alex gave her a

mock glare.

"I'll tell you right now that a good wife never laughs at her husband!" he growled.

Charlotte felt light, giddy with happiness, emboldened by his dancing eyes. She put her slender

hands against his cheeks and slowly drew them down, over the strong brown column of his neck,

down his hard chest, just as she had during the fireworks.

"I like everything you've taught me so far," she said wickedly.

"Oh yes, my lady?" Alex whispered back. His eyes shone with mischief. "And how low will you

go?" Charlotte snatched her hands away, giggling furiously.

"My turn!" Alex announced. He put his large brown hands on her cheeks. His palms almost

covered her whole face, they were so large. And they felt intriguingly hard. Charlotte turned her

head slightly and kissed the edge of his hand.

"No fair distracting me," said her fiancé sternly. His fingers ran delicately over her face, pausing

at her mouth. One rough finger traced the outline of her generous lower lip. Charlotte suddenly

opened her mouth and small teeth bit down on his finger. Alex grinned. He stopped grinning

when a warm tongue touched the tip.

"You taste like honey," said Charlotte, staring at him, her eyes bemused.

Alex smiled slowly and pulled his finger from her mouth, quickly bending his head down and

replacing his finger with his tongue.

Charlotte gasped. Two tongues met, at first discreetly questioning, but then Alex's kiss changed.

His mouth settled over hers with intent, demanding, forcing her mouth wider open. His tongue

took on a wicked rhythm, coercing, mastering her. Charlotte found herself clinging helplessly to

his shirt front, her head thrown back, completely vulnerable to Alex's onslaught. Her heart was

beating like a wild bird's and she had instinctively closed her eyes . . . until his mouth withdrew.

Then her eyes flew open. He was grinning at her.

"Now, where was I?" Alex murmured. He put his hands back on her face and drew them past her

determined chin and languorously down her neck. Charlotte felt as if her lower belly were on

fire. Even her fingers were trembling, she thought dazedly. She watched his black eyes as if they

were the only objects in the world. Alex's fingers trailed over her collarbones and down the

smooth, smooth skin of her chest. He reached the small ruffle which adorned the bodice of her

morning gown. His fingers slid inside. Charlotte didn't know what to think. More than anything

she wanted him to cup her breast, but his fingers slipped sideways, along the ruffle. They reached

her armpits and Charlotte tensed. She was frightfully ticklish, but somehow, his caress didn't

seem to make her ticklish. . .

. The pressure in her lower stomach increased.

Alex's hands lingered on her slim sides, inside her dress, for an instant, and then suddenly his

right thumb ran over the light cotton of her bodice and touched her nipple. Charlotte jumped. His

left thumb did the same. Charlotte gasped and nervously licked her lips. At this Alex almost

groaned. He didn't know how long he could prolong this particular game. Flames were licking at

his groin; the only thought in his mind was to push Charlotte back against the arm of the couch

and . . . and what? He was the one who wanted a virginal bride. He looked at Charlotte. She was

lying back against the couch, her head thrown back, moist lips apart as his thumbs rhythmically

stroked her small, straining nipples. She was his; he knew that as clearly as he had ever known

anything. But he didn't want to take her now, in her parents' house. He wanted to say vows that

meant something, and then make love for the first time in the shadow of those vows.

"No," he whispered. And then he leaned forward anyway. "No," he said again, his breath warm

against her skin as he pushed down the white chambray and took her rosy nipple into his mouth.

Charlotte instinctively arched her back and moaned. Alex's left hand rubbed her other breast,

roughly now, and his teeth feathered over her nipple, nipping and sucking. Charlotte felt

boneless, limp. The fire in her lower belly had been replaced by a feeling of wetness and aching,

open longing.

"Alex," she gasped, her voice breaking. But Alex had momentarily lost control. Charlotte's breast

was so sweet, so perfect: surprisingly heavy for such a slender body, and yet not too large, just

right for his hand. He had her whole bodice pulled below her breasts now, the little cap sleeves

slipping almost down to her elbows. Her breasts were silky white, with just a delicate pink circle

around her nipples . . . and her nipples! They were a deep crimson, swollen, begging. Alex took a

deep breath. He felt intoxicated.

He had never been so wildly aroused. My God, he was close to taking his own fiancée on a

damned uncomfortable Chinese couch full of knobs.

"No," he said hoarsely. He took his mouth off Charlotte's breast but his hands couldn't seem to

stop caressing her. She opened her eyes and looked at him, a look drugged with desire. Alex

looked back in wonder. She was everything he wanted: sweet, intelligent, chaste, and wanton.

She seemed to be so wholesome and yet she was wild . . . even as he looked Charlotte reached

out and pulled him forward.

His lips met hers softly but then, as if she just remembered how to kiss, her mouth opened,

moistly welcoming. And Alex couldn't resist; his tongue drove savagely into her, an erotic assault

that vanquished an already subdued victim. Charlotte moaned and arched forward, pressing her

breasts against his hard body. Alex pulled her around and onto his chest. His mind had gone

blind again; his mouth savaged hers and his hand slid seductively up her stocking, pushing her

dress aside as if it didn't exist. He was raw, hungry with the need to touch her. Charlotte half

sobbed with excitement. The place between her legs was heavy, throbbing, scalding with liquid

warmth. His fingers reached the ruffled legs of her pantaloons and didn't stop, slid inside the

loose cotton legs.

"Alex," Charlotte whispered, shuddering. "I don't know. . . ."

"It's all right, darling." Alex's voice was raw, strained. He slid his fingers into the place between

her legs and Charlotte almost jumped out of her skin. Her hand involuntarily gripped his arm like

a vise.

"No!" she said fiercely. But his fingers moved languorously into

her hot, wet warmth. Stabbing

shocks of desire traveled all over Charlotte's body, especially her legs and stomach.

"No ..." she said again, her tone wavering a bit.

Alex leaned forward and silenced her with his mouth. His fingers suddenly moved from being

gentle and soothing to being hard and sure. Charlotte couldn't help it. Her hand fell from his arm;

she tore her mouth from his and moaned out loud. Alex's heart was racing and he had an erection

that would take a week to subside, but he felt ecstatic. Not only had he talked sweet, sweet

Charlotte into being his wife, but she had a natural passion to match his. The tales he had heard

so often from men in the ton, about wives who lay like unhappy sticks, the unpleasant matings

endured on both sides only in order to have children, flashed through his mind.

Charlotte's mouth was open, her lips crimson and swollen from his kisses. She was breathing in

small, fast pants. He moved a finger into her tight, wet canal and she shook visibly, moaning

again, her head moving restlessly from side to side.

Alex leaned over her, his left hand caressing her breast, his mouth taking hers again, stifling her

imploring moans as she strained forward against his finger. It was all Alex could do not to jerk

down his breeches and drive into her. The only thing stopping him . . .

well, the only thing stopping him, he thought, was himself. Charlotte was completely lost, her

breath coming in catches and starts, sensation racing through her body.

Suddenly her body stiffened and she grabbed his shoulders with a fierce grip.

"Alex!" she cried, and "Alex!" Alex devoutly hoped that no one was in the hallway. Charlotte's

body convulsed into a hundred starry, shattered pieces. Prickles of sweat broke out all over her

body. Alex grimly hung onto the last of his self-control as her lovely body convulsed against his,

ragged moans escaping her lips.

There was silence in the Chinese Salon. Alex looked up at the ceiling and prayed for mastery of

his body. He hadn't felt this close to disaster since he was an adolescent, for God's sake. Charlotte

would undoubtedly be wrenchingly embarrassed when she realized what had happened. He had

to resume control of his aching, throbbing erection. Finally he looked back.

Charlotte was leaning against her corner of the divan, looking not embarrassed, but stunned.

Alex leaned over and caressed her face.

"What was that?" she finally said.

"What?" Alex said. He didn't understand her question.

"What happened to me?" She looked straight at him, her slender eyebrows flying toward her

curls.

Alex couldn't help it; he grinned. "You had an orgasm. In France they call them *la petite*

mort - the little death." Charlotte looked thoughtful.

"Will it happen again?" Alex almost laughed aloud. "I promise," he said. "I promise." ;

Charlotte thought about this while she pulled up the sleeves to her morning gown and shrugged

her skirt down to its proper position.

Then she reached past Alex and took a cucumber sandwich from the lunch Campion brought.

Alex concentrated on thinking about horse racing. Horse racing bored him to tears and so it had

become his private instrument for bodily control. Wonder crept through him. His betrothed had

just had an experience that many women never had, and she was coolly eating a sandwich. His

eyes narrowed and he looked closer. Charlotte's hands were trembling. In fact, as he watched, a

tear snaked down her cheek.

Alex sighed. Miraculously the uncomfortable bulge in his pantaloons disappeared. He grabbed a

cucumber sandwich for himself and slid over to sit beside his teary betrothed.

"Actually," he said meditatively, "it won't just happen again; it will be much better next time.

Because this time I gave you pleasure, but next time we'll give each other pleasure."

Charlotte started. She hadn't thought about him at all.

"Is there something?" she asked.

"Oh, no. If you even touch me, I'll detonate," Alex said cheerfully. "You see," he continued in a

silky voice, "my body is clamoring to leap on top of you and ruin you, as they say, and it is only

my great gentlemanly control and sense of honor which is keeping me here, eating this dry

sandwich." He put it back on the tray and frowningly selected another. "What I ought to do is kiss

you in the carriage and then stroll into' my club wearing these deuced uncomfortable pantaloons,

and it would put 'paid' to all the rumors about my capabilities."

Charlotte looked at him from under her lashes. His dark eyes

slanted over to meet hers, the

message in them undeniably seductive . . . and amused. Suddenly Charlotte giggled. It was rather

funny, although not exactly as he thought. He didn't want to ruin her by going any further on her

mother's Chinese divan, but he already had ruined her.

She touched his sleeve, still feeling a bit guilty. "Thank you," she said. At that Alex looked really

startled, even shocked.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Only one woman ever thanked me before - " He broke off, taking a bite of his sandwich.

"Have you had many lovers?" "Hundreds . . . thousands ..." Alex waved his sandwich in the air.

Charlotte made a little moue of disapproval. He leaned over and looked into her eyes. "A

gentleman never discusses his other conquests," he said. "But since you will be my last conquest,

I might as well tell you that I don't remember ever being as aroused as I have been this afternoon

. . . not in my whole life, and with all those thousands of women."

Charlotte blushed.

"We stopped," Alex said, "because I want to make love to you for an hour, two hours, on a

comfortable bed." His eyes glinted wickedly at her. "And I want us to be married. You'll be

wearing my ring, and you'll be mine, and no one else's. And I want your first experience to be the

beginning of a long series of nights and days together."

"Days?" Charlotte repeated, mystified.

"Days," Alex affirmed with a decadent smile. "My bedchamber has large windows, and I am

going to lay you on my bed with the midday sun pouring in on us, and" - his voice was a thread

of a whisper now - "I shall feast on your body for the whole afternoon."

Charlotte felt she must be cherry red.

"Damn!" Alex said in a conversational tone. "I'm reaching my limit. I shall have to go take a cold

bath." Charlotte giggled.

Alex reached out and put a companionable arm around her shoulders, his hand playing with her

curls.

"So, will you marry me? Shall I tell your father you agree?" he asked.

Charlotte looked up at him, her heart almost bursting with love for his wild black eyes, his flying

eyebrows, his ironic sense of humor . . . the Alex of him.

"You are not always right, you know," she whispered to him, her eyes shining.

"Oh?" His right eyebrow soared up. "I assure you, no one has ever said I was wrong about

anything!" "Maybe there is love at fifth or sixth sight," Charlotte said sweetly. She wound her

arms around his neck. "Maybe love is a matter of thinking the other person is beautiful,

intelligent, and funny, and even wholly . . . desirable. Maybe - " but Alex interrupted her, his

mouth descending on hers again.

The silence in the Chinese salon was only broken by the door opening a short time later as a

rather disheveled but very happy earl and an equally happy but composed-looking future countess

walked out.

Three days before her wedding Charlotte nervously put the

finishing touches on her portrait of

Chloe van Stork. Chloe sat patiently on the couch, as she had for weeks, but Charlotte could tell

that she too was excited. Chloe had not looked at the portrait in progress. She wanted it to be a

surprise, she explained somewhat childishly. Finally Charlotte made herself put down her brush.

She was so jittery at the moment that she might wreck the painting just out of nerves. It was so

odd to be finishing the portrait and getting married at the same time. It felt as if she were putting

away her old life . . . no, that was silly. Alex had already set up a magnificent studio for her in

his house. He had put it next to his study so he would know she was nearby. Charlotte smiled a

secret, silly grin. She wiped her brush carefully and put it down. Later the servants would clean

up all her paints and take them over to Grovesnor Square. To our house, she thought. "Would

you like to walk around and see your portrait, Chloe?" Chloe started in surprise and jumped up.

She's such a nice person, Charlotte thought affectionately, looking at Chloe's earnest little face

and clear eyes. The two young women had become good friends over the eight weeks it had taken

to complete the portrait. Charlotte squinted at her portrait. Was it there? Chloe's deep-down

honesty? She thought it was. The other side to Chloe, the mercurial gleams of desire which

seemed so clear to Charlotte two months ago were rather dimmer in the final portrait. Perhaps

because Chloe herself had lost that yearning look she had after the night of King Lear. The night

before Alex proposed to me, Charlotte thought with a little,

irresistible smile. She couldn't stop

smiling when she thought about him.

"Two more besotted idiots I've never seen!" her great aunt Margaret, a formidable lady at her

best, had declared. Lady Margaret had a swollen toe and was feeling particularly testy during the

formal dinner given by the Duke of Calverstill to celebrate his youngest daughter's engagement to

the Earl of Sheffield and Downes. "We'll see how long that lasts," she said, rather spitefully.

But Margaret really was fond of her youngest niece, and this Alexander seemed to be a decent

sort. She had liked his father - Old Brandy Balls, they called him when she was young. He would

have been horrified to find his son plastered with a nickname like the Ineligible Earl, that was

certain.

In Charlotte's studio, Chloe clapped her hand to her mouth. "It isn't me!" Charlotte looked

startled. "Yes it is, Chloe. It looks just like you."

"No," Chloe breathed. "It's far too beautiful." A smile lit the corners of Charlotte's mouth.

"You're a raving beauty, my dear." She put an arm around Chloe's small shoulders. "You'll just

have to get used to that fact."

Charlotte had chosen not to place Chloe in a fashionable setting, like a ruined temple or a

flowery meadow. Instead, she was sitting on the divan, just as she had in real life. Its slightly

worn surface was unchallenged by Chloe's heavy twill dress, the same dress she often wore to

sittings.

"Don't you think it would be a nicer picture if I wore a new

dress?" Chloe had asked rather

dubiously, when Charlotte announced her intention. "After all, Sissy is in an Egyptian

costume - " Charlotte broke into this comment. "Don't even mention that vulgar portrait Sissy

commissioned! Poor Lady Commonweal was cut up about it for weeks. Cleopatra indeed! Sissy

has no sense of dress."

Chloe thought about defending her school friend and then decided to keep quiet. Sissy did have

awful taste in clothing, there was no getting around it. Chloe fancied that she herself would have

good clothes sense, if her mother would ever let her choose a dress made in a current mode. But

now that Baron Holland had dropped his suit, Mrs. van Stork said quite frankly that she didn't see

any reason to spend a huge amount of money outfitting Chloe. If she found another beau, then

they'd see about it. But Chloe thought agonizingly that she didn't want another beau. She wanted

Will, and only Will. But Will had not only disappeared from her life; she hadn't seen him at the

theater - even if from afar - for over a month. She was getting over him, she promised herself.

Any day now she would stop crying herself to sleep.

She certainly didn't look like a weepy miss in Charlotte's portrait. In the end Charlotte had posed

Chloe in three-quarters profile.

Against the background of her dark dress and the dark couch, her porcelain white skin and deep

blue eyes gave her an otherworldly beauty, an unquestioning look of serenity.

"I don't usually feel like that," Chloe said in a rather small voice.

Charlotte pulled her over to the divan. "Now that the portrait is finished, I want to know what is

going on," she said. "Where is Will? I haven't seen him in weeks!"
"I don't know," Chloe replied

miserably. "I don't have any idea."

"Hmmm," Charlotte said. "It's not like Will to miss the prime part of the season."

"I know," Chloe said in response to her unspoken comment. "He has to find a rich bride, doesn't

he?" Charlotte was touched by the obvious distress in Chloe's eyes. She nimbly avoided the

question.

"Did you turn him down?" Charlotte asked.

Chloe's eyes fell to her hands, pleating and repleating the folds of her heavy skirt. "No," she

half-whispered. "He didn't ask me."

"Well, do you think your father might have warned him off? Because, poor thing, he does need to

marry a fortune, after all. He might lose his estate, from what I hear. And all because his father

was so addicted to racehorses. It's a shame."

Chloe shook her head. "I don't think so. My father actually liked him - he said that Will, Baron

Holland, had a better head for commerce than the average flimsy nobleman - oh, Charlotte, I'm

sorry. I didn't mean to insult you ... or anyone." Her voice shrank to a whisper. "The truth is, the

baron must have decided he just couldn't go through with it, that's all. It's one thing to have to

marry a fortune, but it's another to contemplate marrying someone, especially the daughter of a

cit. I think he just couldn't bring himself to propose to me, and so he went to the country."

Charlotte gave her a swift hug. Then she got up and pulled her portrait around so that it was

facing the couch.

"Chloe van Stork," she said firmly. "Look at my painting." Chloe looked. "Do you really think

that Will would be able to resist the idea of marrying this woman?" Chloe looked, but she didn't

see the delicate appeal in her own blue eyes, the effortless nobility of her high cheekbones and

narrow shoulders, the tempered hint of sexual passion in her full red lips.

"Yes," she said.

"Well, you're wrong." Chloe absorbed this in silence. "Will is coming to our wedding," Charlotte

added.

The Earl of Sheffield and Downes was marrying with more pomp and circumstance than had

been seen in London for years. The invitation list to the wedding was rigorously controlled,

winnowed down to peers and special friends of the bride or groom. That alone ensured that every

person with any claim to being a member of the ton was dying for an invitation and so far only

two invitations had been declined. Charlotte couldn't move outside the house without being

mobbed by reporters from The Tatler and the Gazette; there was even a semipermanent gossip

column in the Tatler dedicated to speculation over her wedding dress, honeymoon, and future life

(childless or not?).

"Now," Charlotte said practically. "What are you going to wear to the wedding?" Chloe shook

her head. To be honest, she hadn't decided yet whether to attend the ceremony. Her parents had

firmly declined their invitation, although they were inordinately pleased to have been invited. If

she attended the ceremony, she would have to be chaperoned by Sissy and her parents. But she

hadn't thought to wear anything special. What did it matter? Will clearly wasn't in London. Now

her heart began to beat quickly. She would see him in three days.

"Oh, no!" Chloe said in agony. "It's too late to get a dress . . . I'll have to wear one of these." She

plucked at the heavy twill again.

"No," Charlotte said. "No, indeed. You see, my mama has been thinking about nothing but my

trousseau for weeks - well, ever since Alex proposed. And that means my room is simply filled

with gowns, more than I could wear in a year. And it means that there are seamstresses on the

premises: They've been here for the last month, sewing upstairs. Let's go. We'll pick out a dress

and they can alter it by tomorrow."

"No, no," Chloe gasped. "You can't do that! I won't let you . . . why, you will need those clothes

on your honeymoon!" Charlotte smiled impudently as she looked back at Chloe, all the while

dragging her irresistibly to the door. "No, I won't. Alex says I won't need any clothes at all." That

silenced Chloe, and Charlotte bore her off upstairs.

On the day of Charlotte's wedding, Londonfolk began to gather at Westminster Abbey at five in

the morning, the better to see the gentry filing into the chapel. By early afternoon, they had

formed a cheerful, rather polite little mob, who raucously commented on the attire of each and

every guest - even old Lady Tibblebutt was applauded as she tottered from her carriage, and told

in no uncertain terms that she wasn't in her dotage yet; a particularly kind bystander even offered

to make her as happy as a butcher on Sunday until the crowd

booed him down.

Thus it was a true compliment when even the sauciest of apprentices fell into a hush of approval

as Miss Chloe van Stork descended from Sir Nigel Commonweal's carriage. Diamond drops fell

from her ears. Her blue eyes shone. But what made the reporters frantically thumb their

commentary books was the irresistible combination of her magnolia-white skin, russet hair, and a

daring green gown that could only have been designed by Antonin Careme. Monsieur Careme

was quite the man of the day, given that it had been leaked to the press that he designed Lady

Charlotte's wedding gown. Speculation was ripe about the style of the wedding dress. Miss van

Stork's gown was a classic Careme: made of a floating, lightweight fabric, it seemed just barely

to cover her bosom, and it clung softly to her legs. But would Charlotte Daicheston want to wear

something so bold for her wedding? By a quarter to four the footmen who stood at the doors of

Westminster Abbey had checked off almost all the names on their lists.

Few had dared to be late, for fear they would be caught in the press of carriages surrounding the

abbey. The crowd outside had reached a fever pitch of excitement. The groom was here;

everyone saw him go in, looking not at all nervous.

"Well, it is the second time for 'im, in't?" a certain Mall Trestle said.

"So it is, so it is," said her friend Mr. Jack, genially. "Now what's going to make that 'un nervous

ain't the wedding, it's the night!" "You're a card, Jack," Mall said rather sourly. She preferred to

think of the earl - such a handsome brute he was! - as having no problems in that area.

"Well, where's the bride, then? Maybe she's piked," Jack said helpfully.

"Loped off? She never," Mall said in disgust. "Who'd leave a bloke like him, an earl an' all, and

even if he's got a floppy poppy, what's she care anyway?" Jack frowned. It offended his sense of

propriety to think of a woman who didn't care of such things.

"Now, Mall," he started heavily - but just then a shiver ran through the crowd, a chattering wave

of voices, as if a flock of starlings suddenly landed on a pasture fence. The bride had arrived.

Charlotte sat absolutely still inside her father's carriage. She felt giddy; she couldn't stop smiling

to herself. Her mother, on the other hand, had already started to cry, sitting on the opposite seat.

But Charlotte didn't make much of this; her mother had wept straight through both of her sisters'

weddings. Adelaide gave a loud sob.

"Mama," Charlotte protested, half laughing. "We're here; we're at the church."

Marcel pinched his wife's arm lovingly. "Now, you remember what we talked about, Addie," he

said in a low voice. "You can cry all night if you want to, but no more crying now."

Adelaide drew herself together, shuddering a bit. Marcel thought it imperative that she not cry in

case it was interpreted as dislike of the match. But who could dislike this match, she thought.

Dear Alexander and Charlotte: They were so much in love.

First the duchess emerged from the ducal carriage, looking properly regal. She walked into the

church on the arm of her maternal cousin, the Marquess of Dorchester. Then from a following

carriage came one of the bride's sisters and her husband, the Marquess of Blass. Another sister

and the bride's brother followed: the papers had reported that they came all the way from

America for the wedding. And finally the Duke of Calverstill himself stepped down from his

carriage and stood by the door.

When Charlotte appeared in the door of the carriage and was tenderly assisted to the street by a

liveried footman, there was a moment of pure silence, an odd thing in the midst of London's

noisy, crowded streets. Then the crowd spontaneously howled its approval.

Antonin Careme had outdone himself. Charlotte's dress was quintessentially French, constructed

in the empire style. But it was made of heavy, heavy silk, not of Careme's usual light fabrics. It

had a classic small bodice, caught up just under Charlotte's breasts. But the skirt was impossibly

narrow, rather than light and floating. The heavy silk fell and fell; it made Charlotte appear to be

all legs and bosom. In the back there was a tiny train, the weight of which gave a dip and sway to

Charlotte's walk. And, most surprisingly, woven into the creamy silk, sewn so tightly that they

seemed part of the woof and the weave of the fabric, were small emeralds. Charlotte looked

deliriously beautiful. Emeralds shone in her hair, and sparkled from her dress. Careme himself

had shed tears when he attended the final dressing that afternoon. His future was assured; he

wept because he was sure he would never dress such a lovely bride again.

Charlotte had a moment of panic, walking under the heavy stone archway that marked the

entrance to Westminster Abbey. What if had changed his mind? What if he didn't want to marry

her after all? But there he was, standing far off, at the top of the abbey. She took a deep breath

and began the long walk to the altar.

The organ music became light and joyful, announcing the entrance of the bride. And the ton

gasped as one when they saw Charlotte.

Alex stood at the front of the church, his eyes fixed on Charlotte. He had never seen such a

beautiful woman in his entire life. It took all his control not to bound down the aisle and sweep

her into his arms. He stayed rigidly still. Lucien Boch, who was acting as best man in the absence

of Alex's brother, Patrick (still traveling in the Orient), drew in his breath sharply. Alex glanced

at him.

"You are a lucky man," Lucien said simply. "The stars shine on you."

Alex smiled. Lucien had a wonderful ability to shrink complexities down to a succinct truth.

Indeed, the stars were shining on him.

Everything he had ever wanted was being delivered into his arms

- and as an extra bonus, Pippa

was in the front row, quietly nestled in the arms of a nanny found by Charlotte. In the weeks

before the wedding Charlotte had even managed to tame Pippa's fearful reaction to strangers.

Charlotte was nearing the front of the abbey. She hadn't yet had the courage to look up and meet

Alex's eyes, although she could feel him looking at her. The duke gave his daughter's hand a

squeeze.

"All right?" he said roughly.

"Yes." A look that has passed between fathers and daughters ever since weddings began passed

between them. Charlotte leaned forward and gave him a fleeting kiss. The duke put her hand into

Alex's and turned around, rejoining his wife.

Charlotte raised her eyes. Alex was smiling down at her so tenderly that her heart turned over.

The archbishop cleared his throat and they both faced the altar.

Afterward Charlotte could only remember bits and patches of the ceremony. The vows - the

vows sunk deep into her mind and soul. To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, till death

do us part. And the moment when Alex looked at her solemnly, repeating everything the

priest said, and then his eyebrow flew up and he said, "With my body I thee worship." And after

the service when the trumpets carolled joyously from the choir loft, and Alex pulled her into his

arms and kissed her as if he would never let her go. And, finally, when they started back down

the aisle and Alex stopped and picked up Pippa in the first row and she held out her arms and

said, "My not-nanny," and Charlotte carried her down the aisle, Pippa's small head of soft curls

rested on her shoulder, to thunderous applause.

It was agreed by all that the wedding of the Earl of Sheffield and Downes to Lady Charlotte

Daicheston was the most romantic ceremony in recent history. Only the truly petty murmured

anything about ineligibility or past marriages. Lady Skiffing was seen to wipe away a tear, and

later allowed as how it had been a very touching occasion. Lady Prestlefield boasted loudly about

how the dear children had met in her very own house.

There were, of course, those men who looked at the creamy expanse of Charlotte's bosom, the

shadowed cleft between her breasts, and prayed fervently for the moment when the bride would

tire of her incapable husband. But they said nothing. And there were women struck by so fierce a

stab of jealousy, seeing Alex's adoring expression, that they could have tripped the bride as she

walked out of the church. But they didn't. The wedding was a huge success: It did exactly as

Charlotte's mother and father had planned. It established Charlotte and Alex as a pair to be

admired, courted, and imitated; it cast the rumors about his previous marriage far into the past.

Indeed only a proper paperskull could have watched the newlywed couple dancing at the ball

given by the Duke of Calverstill after the wedding and not realized that the night was going to be

a long and passionate one. There were many sighs as Alex swept Charlotte about the room in

their first dance as a married couple, their bodies moving as one, his strong arm pulling her closer

as each bar of music passed.

"How long do we have to stay here?" Alex's eyes were twinkling wickedly at Charlotte.

"Be still!" She couldn't not giggle.

"This is it, the limits of my control. Over two months of extreme torture . . . and you want me to

stay here and grin at my old cronies and your great-aunts?" "Why torture?" Charlotte pretended to

take offence. "Didn't I kiss you good night every night?" "Yes ... for as long as it would take to

fry an egg!" "No, longer," she protested. "By that measurement, last night you could have fried

up eggs for a regiment, isn't that true?" "It wasn't long enough," Alex said against her lips. "I can't

take it, Charlotte. I feel insane with desire. I feel crazed. What if I lose my mind, strip off my

clothes, run into Hyde Park naked, and end up in Bedlam?" Charlotte chuckled, her eyes dancing.

"If I thought that was going to happen I might insist we stay here until midnight."

"Shhhh, Charlotte!" Alex quickly retorted. "If these old ladies knew how desperate you are to see

me naked, there's no telling what would happen to your reputation!" "I am an old married lady,

Alexander Foakes."

"So you don't think that married ladies have sought my naked self?" Alex gave her a mocking

leer.

"I'm a married lady, a married countess," Charlotte said softly. "And I am very interested in your

naked self." Alex's eyes darkened and he swung her around in a circle, putting his face against

her soft hair.

"I won't answer that," he finally said, in a rough undertone. Charlotte smiled to herself and

relaxed her body against his. Her breasts pressed softly against his hard chest. Alex drew in a

deep breath and struggled for self-control, a common problem of the last few months. Lord, if

only all those scandal-brewers knew how close he was to the opposite problem. Priapism, he

fancied it was called.

A constant, painful erection.

Chloe stood in the midst of a group of young ladies, watching the newlywed couple dance. Her

eyes were wistful, even if her face was perfectly composed. The same couldn't be said for her

friend Sissy, who was openly gaping at Charlotte and Alex. In fact, Sissy was frantically deciding

that she would marry Richard Felvitson, even if he was a younger son and declared absolutely

ineligible by her mama. Look at Charlotte! She was marrying an "Ineligible Earl" - and look how

happy she was! Unaware of Sissy's reckless thoughts, Chloe struggled against the knowledge that

her throat was tight with tears.

Charlotte's dress had worked its magic for Chloe. Her dance card was full; in all, five gentlemen

had requested the honor of taking her in to supper. But if Baron Holland was here, The Dress - as

Chloe thought of it - hadn't affected him. When Chloe first walked into the church she thought

she caught a glimpse of his tousled blond curls, off to the left on a side aisle. But even when she

craned her head to see him again she couldn't find him. And if he was attending the ball he hadn't

bothered to ask her for a dance.

Charlotte and Alex's dance ended and the ball proper began.

Peter Daysland bowed politely before Chloe and she gave him a shy smile. Ever since she met

Peter in Charlotte's box, the night of King Lear, she had liked him. He seemed to be as quiet as

she was, and he never bothered her with inappropriate comments or by trying to kiss her. They

found their places in the country dance and by the luck of the draw they were one of the first

couples to dance lightly down the arch of joined hands, twirling, whirling their way down the set

and back up the other side, finally stopping at the bottom of the ballroom. They talked for a

while, and Peter told Chloe all about the fireworks she had missed by leaving Vauxhall so early.

"Would you like some lemonade?" he asked, aware that the dance was drawing to a close.

"Yes, I would." Chloe smiled up at him guilelessly, unaware that furious blue eyes were

surveying them both from a foot or so away.

Peter smiled back warmly. He really liked Chloe; she reminded him of his younger sister, Bess.

"I'll return immediately."

Six feet of hard muscled body loomed up at Chloe's right shoulder. She turned her head quickly.

It was Will. His eyes were just as blue as she remembered; bluer than the sky on a blistering day

in July.

"Oh, it's you," she said lamely.

"Yes, it's me," Will snapped back. "What in God's name have you done with yourself?" "Why,

what do you mean?" Will's eyes narrowed. "It was Charlotte,

wasn't it? She's fitted you out like

some kind of French tart. You look awful. What are you doing - trying to marry an earl?" It was

a particularly unfortunate remark since at that moment Chloe's next dance partner appeared:

Braddon Chatwin, the Earl of Slaslow.

"There you are, Miss van Stork. No, you can't dance this one," he said genially to Will. "She's

mine for the next and for supper."

The look of bruised hurt in Chloe's eyes faded to cool ice as she nodded at Will and took

Braddon's arm. Then she deliberately turned and smiled up at Braddon.

"Shall we take a small walk on the terrace before dancing, my lord?" Braddon Chatwin's friendly

face lit up. "I'd be delighted to, Miss van Stork. I'd be delighted to." As they wove their way off

toward the terrace, all Will could hear were Braddon's repeated protestations of delight. He

cursed silently. What was the matter with him? He'd been waiting and waiting to see Chloe, and

then when he saw her he behaved like a dunce, a mean-spirited, nasty sapskull.

When Braddon and Chloe glided to a pause at the end of their waltz, Chloe smiled at him with an

effort. She was having a hard time maintaining a smiling front, given Will's unwarranted attack.

She didn't know what to make of it. Why was he so angry about her beautiful gown? Chloe had

no idea how delectable she looked in the gown; the way every man in the room was practically

salivating just to see her. Will saw those men looking at Chloe in the gown, or rather looking at

the parts of her that were hanging out of the gown, and it made him feel like a bull set loose in a

field of dogs. He saw red.

Even as Braddon dropped his arm from Chloe's waist, Will grabbed her elbow. She jumped in

surprise.

"You again," Braddon said, rather less affably than he had before. "I was about to escort Miss van

Stork - " "Nowhere!" Will snapped. "She's busy."

"No, I am not!" Chloe said sharply, struggling to free her arm from his punishing grip. "I'm not

going anywhere with you, you - " Will's temper grew. "Yes, you are! If you want to go out on the

terrace again, you'll go out with me!" Braddon Chatwin looked from one 218 to the other with a

sense of regret. Pity: He really liked Miss van Stork. He had been on the cusp of seeing her as the

answer to his mother's prayers. Oh, well, he reminded himself. If he wasn't the brightest man in

London, he had been told several times that he was very sensitive for a man. And what a

sensitive man would do in this situation, clearly, was to make himself scarce.

"Miss van Stork, your servant," he said. "Will." He bowed regally (she was giving up an earl for

a baron, after all) and left.

Chloe raised her chin stubbornly. "Baron Holland," she said coolly, summoning the self-control

acquired during years of attending the best schools without having the best background. "Is there

something you would like to say, excluding further commentary on my apparel?" Will stared at

her, nonplussed. "Yes." He pulled her through the open French

windows and onto the terrace.

Chloe looked about quickly. They were well chaperoned; several matrons were sitting at their

ease in the cool evening air.

"Well?" she said, in a tone of acute uninterest, pulling her arm from his. Rather than looking up

she inspected her arm as if she thought to find bruises already appearing. There was a little

silence. Will was cursing himself again. For years he had a deserved reputation for being a

lady-killer. He knew to a pin how to compliment a woman, how to turn a teasing, merry moment

into an erotic question. And how to ask a woman to marry him. Lord knows, he'd asked three so

far. So where had all his skill gone? He felt like a young buck trying to make the acquaintance of

a duchess.

"Perhaps this is not a good time," he finally said. At that Chloe looked up, her eyes briefly

meeting his, and then she looked back down again. "I apologize for insulting your gown, Miss

van Stork," he said with deliberate formality. "I was, naturally, driven only by jealousy." But he

said it so lightly that it sounded like a mere excuse. Chloe nodded in response.

"Shall I escort you inside? I am sure your next dance partner must be looking for you."

A faint pink rose in Chloe's cheeks. She was struggling not to cry as she never had before. She

nodded silently again. Will took her arm and gave her without another word into the arms of her

next partner. Thankfully the dance was a rousing cotillion, and Chloe didn't have to say anything

and only smiled punctiliously at her partner when she bumped up against him in the movements

of the dance.

The evening progressed. Chloe thought she'd never been to a more horrible ball in her life. Will,

savagely aware of every man who took Chloe into his arms, flirted outrageously with the wife of

Captain Prebworth. And everyone knew that Camilla Prebworth was no better than she should

be, Chloe thought miserably. She tried not to watch, but somehow she just kept seeing Will's

large blond head wherever she looked. Perhaps she should plead a heartache and go home? But

then . . . then she wouldn't see Will again tonight, and he might disappear into the country.

Wasn't it better to see him from afar than not to see him at all? She argued with herself back and

forth.

Watching Charlotte and Alex wave good-bye from the top of the ballroom stairs only fed her

heartache. They were so happy, so obviously in love. Alex looked at Charlotte as if she were the

moon and the stars . . . you wouldn't catch him saying that his wife looked like a French tart,

Chloe thought furiously. And then she blinked back tears again. It was probably just that

Charlotte was naturally aristocratic, being a duke's daughter, and Will thought she, Chloe, was

too low-born to wear a gown like this. First she felt like throwing up, and then like slapping him

in the face.

Chloe and Braddon Chatwin had an extremely animated supper, given that Will was feeding Mrs.

Prebworth pieces of chicken with his fingers, a mere two tables away. Chloe flirted with Braddon

in a way that shook that earl to the bottom of his toes. Luckily for him, he kept his head by

assuring himself that his sensitivity had not been wrong, and Miss van Stork didn't really mean

for him to grab her up and take her off to meet his mama this very moment.

Chloe had never been so wretched in her life. She was flirting with a big, clumsy person. He

might be an earl, but he was the most ponderous man she'd ever met. All he seemed to be able to

talk about were his stables. And meanwhile Will was practically kissing Mrs. Prebworth right

there, in front of the whole ton Finally she'd had enough.

She raised her eyes endearingly to Braddon. "My lord, I find myself suddenly quite

tired - although I have most enjoyed our supper," she added hastily. "Will you escort me back to

Lady Commonweal, please?" And so when Will risked another glance in the direction of Chloe

and that confounded Braddon, as he had taken to thinking of his old school friend, there was no

one there. The table had been taken over by a chattering flock of matrons, escorted by one bored

husband.

"Damnation!" he swore, jumping to his feet. Mrs. Prebworth raised her eyebrows, laughing.

"Did the bird fly the coop?" she asked.

Will sat down again. "You saw through me?" "Not that I don't appreciate your attention," Camilla

Prebworth assured him. "But I felt as if someone was being murdered to the right, you looked

over so often. Well, go find her," she said. "And if you see my husband, will you tell him where I

am?" She was a bit tired of being the target of so many gossips' eyes. Maybe it was time to take

herself and her beloved, long-suffering husband home.

Will jumped to his feet, smiling down at her. "Thanks," he said briefly. He strode out of the

supper room at top speed.

As soon as he entered the ballroom he saw her. Somehow his nerves seemed to be attuned to

Chloe's presence. He could instinctively pick her out of any crowd. But what in God's name was

he to do now? The Commonweals were making unmistakable gestures of leave-taking. Lady

Commonweal was clucking about, gathering her shawls and pillboxes; Sir Nigel Commonweal

was holding his wife's wrap while his eyes scanned - far too ardently! Will thought

wrathfully - Chloe's bosom. But it was clear that someone was holding up the party. That

tiresome girl of theirs must be missing, Will thought. What was her name? Something like Bessy,

except that was a dairy maid's name. Even as he watched, Lady Commonweal urgently directed

Chloe off toward the salons while her husband headed out to the terrace and the gardens beyond.

Will moved quickly along the side of the ballroom, twisting among groups of chattering girls,

delicate French chairs holding matrons wearing little starched caps, the occasional gallant

broodily leaning against the wall. He had to see her; he had to talk to her.

Tomorrow would be too late. Then, suddenly, there Chloe was before him. She was working her

way along the same wall, rather than heading straight out to the salons, as he had guessed.

Chloe looked at him guardedly, her beautiful eyes shadowed.

"She isn't back there," Will said with a toss of his head. Chloe frowned. "Bessy, or whatever her

name is, the Commonweal girl," he added. "She must be in one of the salons."

Chloe nodded a chilly thank you and turned around, working her way back to the doors leading to

the great hallway. Every nerve tingled, telling her that Will was following just behind. At the top

of the ballroom steps she didn't allow herself to look behind her.

Instead she set off resolutely down the hallway toward the Green Salon, as she had heard

Charlotte call it. She pushed the door open cautiously. Surely Sissy couldn't be foolish enough to

be sitting out a dance in a closed salon! That alone was enough to ruin a girl's reputation. The

room appeared to be empty, lit only by candles that were beginning to burn low.

Suddenly a warm, utterly male body came up sharply behind hers and pushed her through the

doors, which shut behind them with a little click. Will wrapped his arms around Chloe and held

her there, her back pressed against his chest. She didn't struggle; that must mean something, he

thought.

"I missed you," he said. Chloe stared straight ahead. She had her emotions under fragile control.

The only thought in her mind was that she mustn't respond to anything he said because he would

accuse her of being a tart again. Then his head bent and she realized he was dropping kisses on

her head and rubbing his cheek in her hair.

"Sir," she began primly.

Will kissed her ear. "Yes?" Chloe wrenched herself out of his arms, walking forward and only

turning around when she reached the back of a chair. "Just because I look like a tart doesn't mean

you can behave as if I am one," she said fiercely.

Will gulped. "I didn't mean that! I just meant that your dress . . . well, it's so revealing, or it

reveals so much of you. ..." His hands nervously sketched a shape in the air. Chloe glared at him.

"It's no more revealing than what the other ladies are wearing!" Will wondered what she meant

by emphasizing ladies but ignored it. He walked toward her. "You are not like the rest of the

ladies - " he began.

She interrupted him. "I knew it! Because I'm not a lady you think I shouldn't be wearing this

dress!" The tears that had threatened to fall all day welled up and overflowed. She ran to the

door, but Will was there, quick as lightning.

"How can you even say that?" he demanded furiously. "I meant nothing of the sort! You are

every inch a lady," he continued more softly, "from your beautiful hair to your delectable toes. I

acted like an idiot because, well, I liked your old clothes because you were my undiscovered

diamond, my jewel that no one else knew about. And I know I acted like a madman when I first

saw you this evening. But everyone was looking at you, and all the men were saying you were a

diamond of the first water. It was a fit of insanity. You see . . . I'd got into the habit in the last

month of thinking that you were mine, and no one else's."

Chloe stood stock still, her face pressed against his shirt by the strength of his arms around her.

"Where have you been?" she asked, her voice muffled.

"Working," Will replied. "I've been organizing the sheep farmers on my land. We have started a

weaving guild, and just last week a new flock of fancy sheep were delivered. You see, I've

decided to make a fortune rather than marry into it."

A hand pushed up her face and Will kissed the tears from Chloe's cheeks. She looked at him

gravely. She didn't know what to say.

What about her fortune? "I want to marry you, Chloe. But I want you on my terms . . . with my

own money, and not for your fortune."

Chloe nodded, her eyes filling up again.

"Why are you crying, dearest?" Will asked.

"I didn't know where you were . . . and I thought you couldn't bear the idea of marrying me." She

hid her face in his shirt again. Will kissed her neck.

"I want to marry you. And so does virtually every other single man out there and quite a lot of the

married ones as well. Can you wait for me?" He looked at her anxiously. Chloe just barely

stopped herself from smiling at the ridiculousness of his request. "At most it will be a year before

the wool starts making a profit - and the moment it makes a profit, I will be pounding at your

front door."

Chloe did smile at that. "Oh, Will," she said. Will looked down at her. His composed, unfailingly

neat beloved looked like a ragamuffin who'd been in a storm. He

had ruffled her smooth hair

when he kissed her head; her cheeks were tearstained and pink.

But she looked exquisitely happy, and not even the abrupt and furious entrance of Lady

Commonweal, who had found her daughter cannoodling on the balcony and now found Chloe

cannoodling in a closed salon, could take away the light in her eyes.

Her hand lost in his huge one, Chloe listened as Will talked Lady Commonweal into a better

mood, flattered Sissy, and arranged to escort Chloe home himself. Will's hand felt different - it

was no longer a smooth, dancing man's hand, but a hand toughened and callused by two months'

work. Chloe smiled blissfully and, characteristically, said nothing.

Chapter The new Countess of Sheffield and Downes; perched on the edge of a huge bed in the

finest hostelry in Bournemouth, feeling unwontedly nervous. Charlotte looked at her hands.

They were trembling slightly. The problem was that her husband was about to appear. And then

they would make love, again. It was the again that was making her clutch the bedcovers. Oh, why

hadn't she been more blunt with her mother, asked her a few more questions? For her part,

Adelaide had avoided the subject entirely, simply patting her daughter on the shoulder and

cheerfully remarking that since Chair lotte knew all about marital relations they didn't have to

talk

about it.

Charlotte was unsurprised by Adelaide's wish to drop the topic. For one thing, Charlotte had a

very clear memory of the pain that was involved. No wonder her mother didn't want to' discuss it.

Charlotte flinched at the thought, involuntarily pressing her thighs tightly together. She could

only suppose that women got used to it as the years passed. Her eyes softened. She did love all

the other things that Alex did. She thought dimly about the Chinese salon.

But what was really terrifying was her growing conviction that Alex would think something was

wrong with her. The blood - and the pain - she hadn't thought about that for years. Then

suddenly, about a week ago, it all came back to her. What if she was ruined, physically? She

stared down at her toes, just peeking out from beneath her lace

peignoir. Antonin Careme's idea

of a trousseau was thoroughly French. She was barely dressed, Charlotte thought. There was no

use hoping that Alex would be uninterested: He had spent the last two hours in the coach sitting

on the opposite seat. Because he was feeling like a satyr, he said.

She got up and put on the large flannel robe she wore after bathing. It probably looked ridiculous,

given that creamy silk trailed below its hem, but Charlotte didn't care. It made her feel safer. She

tied the cord tightly. And knotted it. Marie had brushed out her hair, giggling significantly the

whole time, but even she had left some twenty minutes ago. Maybe Alex had fallen asleep,

Charlotte thought with dawning hope. Maybe she would be spared tonight? But even as her

shoulders relaxed, the heavy wooden door swung open and there he stood. Her husband,

Charlotte thought. She couldn't help a tiny smile at the sight of him. Alex was so

splendid-looking. He had taken off his cravat at some point, and his white linen shirt was open at

the top. He didn't have his jacket on either, and her eye instinctively followed the line of his

skintight knit pantaloons as he walked across the room toward her. Even a nitwit would have

noticed that he was expecting a good deal more pleasure out of this evening than she was. The

last trace of color drained from Charlotte's face.

Alex swallowed a grimace. By God, he had wanted a virgin bride, but now he saw what one

looked like, he wondered why anyone would desire such a thing. Gone was his laughing, teasing

betrothed, who would kiss him good-bye until his blood raged with desire and then run teasingly

up the steps to her own room. Charlotte's pinched white face looked pitifully small.

"Sweetheart," Alex said, sitting down next to his wife on the bed. "Who's been telling you old

wives' tales? It doesn't hurt that much."

Charlotte digested this in silence. She could hardly say, at this point, that she knew all about the

pain and he was wrong. She buried her face in his shoulder. Alex pulled Charlotte into his arms.

What in God's name was she wearing? She looked like a fuzzy white ghost. He started to kiss

whatever parts of her face he could pry off his shoulder. Charlotte burrowed closer. Alex put

butterfly-light kisses all along the rim of her dainty pink ear. Then he put out his tongue and ran

it gently along the swirling shell.

A muffled voice emerged from his shirt. "Have you made love to many virgins?" Alex's

eyebrows flew up. Did she think there was anything special to it? What had her mama said to

her? "Hundreds," he chuckled. Charlotte shivered. "I'm fooling, Charlotte," Alex said. "I made

love to one virgin before you." That was me, Charlotte thought. "And she didn't seem to find it

objectionable; in fact, I think she quite enjoyed it," Alex added. At that Charlotte clamped her

mouth together. Clearly this was not the time to clarify their past relations.

Alex's hands had started to move over her shoulders and back in a manner that was less

comforting than seductive. "Don't worry," he whispered. "I'm your husband and you are my wife.

You may feel a moment or two of pain, but believe me, Charlotte, after that the pain will be gone

forever. And there may not be any pain at all. We'll make love tonight, and tomorrow, and the

next night, and every night for thirty years, and we will get better and better together." Alex's lips

were trailing down her neck now, burning her skin.

Charlotte forced herself to relax. She lay passively in Alex's arms rather than flinching away

from him. His mouth trailed up her throat and pushed up her chin. She looked up at him.

Alex's heart missed a step. She was incredibly beautiful, his bride. Soft black curls framed a face

so delicate that it looked like a Botticelli painting. Alex took Charlotte's face in his hands and

covered it with passionate kisses, kissing her dark, questioning eyes, her winged eyebrows, the

petal-soft curve of her cheeks, her small determined chin. She seemed quieter, he thought, less

like a bird struggling to escape from his hand. He lowered his mouth gently onto hers, teasing

her, begging her to open her mouth the way he had taught her.

Charlotte was having an internal battle. Alex's soft kisses were awakening all those trembling,

stabbing feelings that made her sleep so restlessly in the last two months. She would awake

gasping from a dream in which she begged for something . . . she wasn't sure what. Something

only Alex could give her.

But some part of her also held back. Don't do it, a small voice advised. It will hurt; he will find

out that there's something wrong with you; it will ruin everything! Yet even as Charlotte's mind

struggled, her body responded. Alex was kissing her so sweetly, so tenderly. Almost unnoticed,

her mouth slid open and she drew in his tongue. A corresponding stab of fiery desire mounted in

her stomach. Charlotte's hands crept up to Alex's neck, and her fingers entwined with his thick

curls. The kiss was deceptively innocent, like all the kisses they shared in the last two months.

Fear flew from Charlotte's mind along with memory of pain. This was nothing terrifying, simply

one of the feverish kisses Alex often gave her. He would finally tear himself away, gasping out

loud.

Momentarily she forgot that there was more expected this night.

So when Alex pulled back, looking down at his bride speculatively, he was happy to see her

cheeks delicately flushed, her eyes dreamy. This was his Charlotte.

"I think we should have some champagne," he said. "I didn't get to toast the bride, after all."

Relief showed in Charlotte's eyes. He wasn't going to jump on her and . . . penetrate her.

"Oh, yes!" she said, a little too quickly. Alex chuckled.

"Would you believe me if I said that next week when I ask if you would like champagne you will

toss your wine glass to the side and leap on top of me?" "No," Charlotte said, fascinated despite

herself. Leap on top of him What did he mean? Alex uncorked a bottle of Dom Perignon. He was

having less trouble than he thought stamping down his raging emotions. It must be all the

practice, he thought with a touch of self-mockery. Or, more likely, he just didn't find the idea of a

frightened bed partner arousing. He carried two slender glasses back to the bed.

"At some point tonight we have to toast my father," Alex said, grinning at Charlotte. As soon as

he had left her immediate vicinity, she had grown stiff and nervous again. "He laid down this

champagne before he died, and what with the embargo because of Napoleon we would probably

have to toast each other in brandy."

Charlotte wrinkled her nose. She had found out that the main ingredient in Keating's headache

remedy was brandy. And she still couldn't quite reconcile the memory of her absolutely wanton

behavior, sprawled over her mother's Chinese divan, with her sense of self. She could only

suppose that she had been totally inebriated.

"Now," Alex said. "I don't suppose you learned any drinking songs when you were in that prudish

boarding school of yours, did you?" Charlotte stared at him in fascination. "What do you mean?"

"Drinking rounds? No, of course not," Alex said to himself. But Charlotte wasn't stupid. She

heard a way out, and she seized it.

"I would like to learn one," she said. She sipped her champagne.

"Right," Alex replied. He couldn't stop grinning tonight. This had to be the craziest way to

seduce one's own bride that had ever occurred to a man before. "Now, this is one of Patrick's

favorite songs." Alex began singing in a rich baritone. Charlotte

listened, fascinated.

"Last night a dream came into my head, Thou wert a fine white loaf of bread; Then if May butter

I could be, How I would spread, Oh! How I would spread my self on thee!" Charlotte's cheeks

turned hotly pink at the end of the verse.

"Now you have to drink," her husband prompted. Charlotte obediently sipped her champagne.

"Not like that!" Alex protested. "A proper swallow, or I won't sing the next verse!" Charlotte

giggled and took a huge swallow. "Now," Alex said, "the audience has to pay the singer to

continue." Charlotte looked surprised. "With a kiss." Charlotte obediently leaned forward and

pressed a kiss on his lips. Alex smiled at her and began the next verse. "Lately when Fancy too

did roam ..." but he broke off in a strangled choking fit. Alarmed, Charlotte quickly pulled her

feet up onto the bed and slid over to sit right next to Alex.

"Are you all right?" She pounded him on the back. Alex kept his head down to hide his smile.

"No," he said in a melancholy tone. "I'm afraid the singer wasn't paid enough."

Charlotte giggled despite herself. She took another drink of champagne and set down the glass.

Then she put a kiss on Alex's ear.

When he didn't move she daringly put out her tongue and slid it around the inside of his ear, just

as he had with hers. Alex shuddered and surged at his bride. His mouth closed hotly over hers,

taking her mouth in a drugging, passionate kiss that sent her melting into his arms. Her mouth

was entirely open to his assault, to the fiery, demanding rhythm

of his tongue.

Then he pulled back abruptly. Charlotte gasped. Alex smiled and tucked one of her curls back

behind her ear. Then he sang again: "Lately when Fancy too did roam, Thou were, my dear, a

honey-comb; And had I been a pretty bee, How I would suck Oh! How I would creep, creep into

thee."

"Drink," her husband prompted. Charlotte giggled again. She couldn't help thinking of Will

Holland telling her that he was a honey bee. She took a drink.

"Is Patrick's favorite song well known?" she asked.

"Tolerably. Why?" Charlotte smiled into her glass as Alex refilled it.

"I think someone once quoted part of this verse to me."

"Huh!" Alex snorted. "I hope it wasn't the last line." Charlotte chortled a bit. Alex looked a bit

sulky at that revelation: Could it be that he was jealous? Alex frowned for a moment and then

forgot his jealousy. He gave his beloved a mock glare.

"My payment."

"Oh," Charlotte leaned forward, entirely willing.

"No." His large hand pushed her back. Charlotte's left eyebrow flew up. Despite himself, Alex

stared at her eyebrow in fascination.

Could it be that they had a shared ancestor, somewhere back in the middle ages? "My lord,"

Charlotte prompted in dulcet tones. Your payment?" "That white thing - off with it!"

Charlotte, who was relishing the glowing warmth that was spreading throughout her body,

readily undid the knot at her waist and slipped off her bathrobe. She had the enormous

satisfaction of seeing her husband's eyes widen for a moment. He swallowed hard.

Charlotte grinned at him impudently.

"The next verse?" she asked.

"Just a minute," Alex said, his voice suddenly raspy. "I need a moment to recover." Charlotte was

wearing a creamy silk nightgown of the type he wouldn't have thought proper ladies ever wore. It

had wide lacy straps over her shoulders - but the unique part of the gown was that one of the lacy

straps continued straight into the silk. It wandered over Charlotte's left breast, and Alex could

clearly see a small rosy nipple peeping at him. It seemed to wind around the back, and curved to

the front just below the waist. But because Charlotte had her legs tucked under her, he could just

glimpse a bit of curly dark hair through the lace. Oh, God, she wasn't wearing anything under the

gown.

Alex's arousal had reached an excruciating point. He tore his eyes away from Charlotte's waist,

taking a deep breath, and readjusted his pantaloons. It would be heaven to take them off, but he

didn't dare frighten her at this point. Still, he looked up and caught her looking at his hands.

Instead of looking like a hypnotized deer, she was looking distinctly interested, it seemed to him.

"The next verse?" Charlotte demanded. Alex cleared his throat.

"You sound very tired," his wife said. "Maybe I could . . . give you some energy." To Alex's utter

surprise, Charlotte closed the inch or so between them, so her side was touching his. She swung

her legs over his. Then she leaned back on her hands and smiled at him enchantingly.

"Charlotte," Alex said hoarsely. "If you want me to keep singing, you can't torment me like this."

His eyes kindled a blaze in Charlotte that made her simply arch one delicate shoulder, delighting

in the way the silk draped over her full breasts. Without conscious volition, Alex's hand reached

out and almost roughly traced the enchanting, heavy weight of

one breast. Charlotte's eyes

darkened but she didn't push him away. She let her breast stay in his hand and somehow found

her voice in the midst of the raging feelings surging through her body. She felt like shamelessly

pressing herself into his arms, but instead she said: "My verse!" Alex made a strangled noise and

pulled his hand back from her breast. He grabbed the two glasses of champagne on the side table

and took a gulp from his glass, handing her the other. After he gave her an admonishing look,

Charlotte also drank.

"All right," Alex said finally. "But - for this kind of ballad a singer cannot be as uncomfortably

dressed as this particular singer is." He stood up, swinging Charlotte's legs off his knees while

continuing to talk in a conversational tone. "You know what I mean, Charlotte. That Indian snake

charmer we saw at the Palladium - what was he wearing?" Charlotte wasn't paying any attention.

Alex drew his white shirt over his head, the action emphasizing his muscled chest. His skin was a

golden honey-brown. She trembled with longing. She would like to run her fingers over his

muscles . . . Alex noted her bemused expression with relief. He pulled off his boots, and finally

hauled his knit pantaloons and underwear down to his ankles and stepped out of them. Charlotte's

eyes widened but she couldn't stop looking.

Alex grinned. "He was wearing a white nightshirt, Charlotte!" She just stared at him. "Would you

like me to pull on a nightshirt?" Charlotte shook her head no, then yes.

"Too late!" her husband said cheerfully, sitting down on the bed. Charlotte's stomach felt as if it

were melting. He was just going to sit there, stark naked, with all the candles burning? She

instinctively crossed her arms over her breasts. She would never sit around naked, in the light, no

matter what he thought. She had conveniently forgotten all of Alex's whispered stories about how

he planned to make love to her in full sunshine.

Alex pretended not to notice the arms clamped over Charlotte's breasts. He handed Charlotte her

glass of champagne again, and she reluctantly unwrapped one arm in order to take it. Then he

cleared his throat self-importantly.

"A vision too I had of old, That thou a mortar were of gold; Then could I but the pestle be, How I

would pound, Oh! Mow I would pound my spice in thee!" Charlotte was trying to cope with the

feeling of melting, liquid fire that seemed to be invading every limb of her body. Was Alex going

to "pound" into her? It even ... it even sounded pleasant. Never one to miss an opportunity, Alex

took one look at Charlotte's flushed cheeks and trembling lips and smoothly removed her glass

again. His body came down on hers with crushing force, suddenly pressing Charlotte back onto

the bed. She gasped but her hands came up to his neck rather than pushing him away. The

sensation of his body intimately pressing into hers engrossed all her attention. Instinctively she

arched her hips slightly and pressed against him.

Slowly! Alex thought. Slowly! He took Charlotte's mouth, lingeringly kissing her in a

tormenting, seductive rhythm that made her writhe under him. Her lungs felt as if they didn't

have enough air; her legs were trembling. Charlotte moaned, her breath coming in short pants.

Still Alex prolonged the kiss, his hand abruptly descending onto her breast. His thumb rubbed

Charlotte's nipple through her silk gown and she arched against him again. She clutched his

shoulders with her hands.

Alex was almost mad with desire, and yet in the back of it all he felt ecstatic. This was

it - heaven, the closest he'd been to heaven since he made love to his girl-in-the-garden. And this

time was so much better than the garden, because it was his Charlotte who lay under him, her

head thrown back, sweat glimmering on her throat, her red lips opening in shattered moan after

moan. God, he knew she would be a fiery lover.

Then rational thought deserted him. Charlotte's hands fluttered from their snug circle around his

neck and slowly found their way down his naked back to the curve of his waist where his

muscled buttocks flared. Alex groaned as her hands curiously swept down as far as they could

go, finally sliding to the side and coming back up. He grabbed her hands and held them over her

head, rubbing his lips across hers.

She opened her eyes. "I want to touch you too," she whispered. Alex almost lost his control on

the spot.

"No," he said huskily. "You're driving me mad, Charlotte. Next time." He caught up both of her

wrists in one of his huge hands and dropped his other hand down

to her waist. Then he began

slowly to haul up her nightgown, watching her eyes for signs of fear. All he saw was dazed,

innocent longing. In fact, Charlotte didn't even notice what he was doing. Her body felt as if it

weren't hers anymore. Her breasts felt heavier, prickly, alive. Her legs had become a pool of

liquid fire. The only thing she could think about was pulling Alex on top of her . . . feeling him

rub his heavy weight against her again. Her stomach twisted with longing. She whimpered, and

opened her eyes.

"Alex," she whispered, "please!" Her nightgown was at her waist. Alex's hand dipped into the

sweet enclosure between her thighs and a shudder of sweat broke out over his body. She was

ready . . . she was more than ready. On her part, Charlotte let out a half shriek as his finger sunk

into her warm depths. She sobbed out loud, her breathing labored.

Alex positioned himself over her, rubbing himself against her. Charlotte's eyes were fastened

desperately on his, her body taken over by a throbbing, aching need. Alex slid slowly inside her,

rigidly controlling every movement. He was planning the slowest, most gentle first time that any

woman ever experienced. He went about a third of the way in and then began to withdraw. But

Charlotte whimpered and clutched his shoulders with a heartfelt "No ..."

Alex looked down at her. Charlotte's face was wild with desire, transformed. He leaned down to

kiss her and her mouth opened vulnerably to his invasion. She arched against him again, and he

burst free. For the first time in his adult life Alexander Fakes completely lost control.

He plunged into Charlotte's incredible warmth, ramming his way into the narrow canal that clung

moistly and seemed to part for him. Dimly he noticed that Charlotte seemed to be lucky enough

not to have a maidenhead. But he was lost, driving into her again and again. And yet, she was

with him. He knew, even as he knew that if she hadn't been with him, there would have been

nothing he could do about it. He had waited too long for this moment.

For her part, Charlotte was having a hard time not shrieking. But there was no pain, just

unbearably sweet, unbearably piercing pleasure. With every stroke her body instinctively rose to

meet Alex's. And she felt a rising sense of tension that wasn't helped even when her body ground

against his.

When Alex came up on his knees, putting his large hands under her hips and pulling her up to

meet his punishing strokes, she couldn't stop herself; she started to cry out with every drive of his

hips. Alex reached down and ripped her negligee apart at the neck, grabbing her breast and

bringing it to his mouth. It was like throwing gunpowder on a raging fire. With the next thrust of

his hips Charlotte screamed out loud. Her body convulsed sweetly around Alex's and he plunged

into her madly, driving himself home with her. His deep, growling moan came seconds after the

explosions in her body began to cease. And then his heavy body, damp with sweat, settled onto

hers.

There was a moment of silence. Alex was trying to collect himself. He'd made love in gardens, in

a carriage, to French courtesans and to a Danish princess, but he had never experienced shared

passion like this in his entire life. Charlotte was still trying to catch her breath. Her mouth kept

curving into a smile of pure happiness. She snuggled her cheek against Alex's curls. Her whole

body was caught in a wave of lassitude; her eyes started to close immediately. But she couldn't

just go to sleep, she thought languorously.

"Alex," she finally murmured into his neck. "I didn't know ... it was wonderful, so wonderful."

There was a little silence. Alex lazily kissed the top of her head.

"I have never felt anything like it," he admitted. Charlotte almost drifted off into sleep. Then she

remembered what she wanted to say.

"It wasn't at all like the other time," she whispered. "No pain . . ."

Her eyes fluttered shut and she fell straight into sleep. She didn't notice that her husband's body

had suddenly become rigid on top of her.

With utter disbelief Alex rolled away from his sleeping wife's side, staring at her incredulously.

A black, black emptiness pressed down on his heart. By God, it had happened again. Charlotte

was no virgin, just as Maria had been no virgin. No wonder she felt no pain; no wonder she

wanted to touch him! Someone else, another man, had probably told her to say that, had taught

her how to touch a man and arouse him. His stomach heaved. Charlotte looked so innocent, so

unbelievably innocent, curled into a snug ball, her cheeks still flushed with pleasure, a small

smile hovering even in her sleep. Why shouldn't she be happy, for God's sake? She'd fooled him.

He was the loser again; fooled by a woman into thinking she was a virgin. She must have been

laughing every night in the last couple of months! He thought with loathing of the nights when he

had left her house, raging with desire. He had been such a simpleton he hadn't even visited a

whore to satisfy himself, thinking it would be disloyal to her. Disloyal! By God, he had a whore

of his own.

His stomach heaved again and Alex made it to the chamber pot just in time, regurgitating all the

wedding supper he and Charlotte had lovingly shared in a private dining room downstairs. His

mind was black, burning with rage, his body twisted with self-loathing.

In the bed Charlotte sat bolt upright, startled out of her sleep by the noise Alex was making in the

corner of the room. Instantly she scrambled off the bed, running over to the corner in her bare

feet.

"Sweetheart," she said softly, rubbing her hand along Alex's bent back. Then she let go and

turned to snatch a towel from the chair.

She brought it back just as Alex straightened up. He grabbed the towel from her and rubbed his

mouth. Slowly Charlotte realized that something was wrong besides Alex's stomach. He was

looking at her in such a way. . . .

"What's the matter, Alex?" she finally asked timidly. Something about his glance made her clutch

her ruined nightgown together at the neck. His eyes raked her body, conveying utter disgust and

rage.

"The matter is," he said in a grating, ice-cold voice, "that I only just found out that I married yet

another whore, and I am finding it a difficult sop to swallow."

Charlotte stared at him in utter bewilderment.

"You were no virgin, were you?" he advanced on her menacingly, his eyes black with rage.

"No," Charlotte said tremblingly, "but - " "God damn it!" Alex turned away from her abruptly.

His fingers were shaking with the urge to hit her, but he had never hit a woman, not even Maria.

"Aren't you going to scream back at me?" he demanded. "Maria was another whore like you, but

at least she proudly stood up for herself! But then she didn't enjoy herself as much as you do. Or

did you fake that whole performance, those little cries, the way you faked being so afraid? God, I

should have known the minute you responded to me like that. No lady acts the way you did. I

never heard of a lady begging for it, panting, the way you did!" Charlotte was shaking all over.

He was right - or no, he was wrong; she wasn't a whore. But voices clamored in her head, rules

learned almost unknowingly from Lady Sipperstein at Lady Chatterton's School for Girls. Ladies

don't wiggle their bottoms; ladies speak only in quiet voices; ladies never display too much

exuberance or any strong emotion. Lady Sipperstein always said that Charlotte wiggled too much

when she walked. Alex was right: she wasn't a lady. It didn't take much imagination to think of

what Lady Sipperstein would think of a woman who screamed out loud and begged. . . .

Color stained Charlotte's cheeks. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked down at the floor. She

was the picture of guilt.

"Why did you do it?" Her husband was walking toward her again; through her tears she could

dimly see his large form looming down on her. "Why did you do it?" he hissed, emphasizing

each word. "Were you so desperate for a husband? Or was it just that I was the best on the

market? Why not poor Braddon? Didn't he seem like a better risk? Poor Braddon. He's such a

block that he probably wouldn't have ever realized that you were just another slut, no virgin. He

would have been perfectly happy with his tainted bargain. My, my," he said savagely, "I think

you made a mistake. Because already married one slut, and so I'm pretty familiar with the

breed."

Charlotte couldn't even take in his words by this point. She clapped her hands over her ears, her

whole mind and body protesting against the hatred that vibrated in her husband's voice.

"No!" she said loudly.

"Aha! Now the screaming is going to start, right? Let me give you a hand!" Alex picked up a jar

that stood on her dressing table and flung it violently against the wall. It smashed, glass tinkling

to the ground. Charlotte watched, mesmerized, as white cream slid down the wooden boards. Her

heart was thumping in pure terror. Maybe he would kill her, she thought. She had read about such

things in the papers. And the law would say he was justified. Because he had been tricked into

marrying a woman who wasn't pure.

A drop of strength infused Charlotte's body. If she was going to be killed by an irate

husband - some part of her mind couldn't even believe this was happening to her - she was not

going to let him think he had the right to do it.

"I am not a whore," she said in a small but even voice. She didn't want to look at Alex but she

made herself. She raised her head and met his eyes, flinching at the loathing she saw there. "I

only slept with you, once before."

Alex's eyes narrowed. What kind of story was this? Did she think he went about deflowering

virgins in his sleep and wouldn't realize that her story was just hogwash? "I never slept with you

before," he retorted, utter contempt gracing every word. "And as God is my witness, I will never

sleep with you again." He suddenly reached out and wrenched Charlotte's nightgown from her

clutching hand, ripping it the rest of the way to the floor.

"You should be able to market your wares pretty well in London," he said calmly, surveying her

body with steely eyes. Charlotte hardly heard him, only thinking that he seemed to be regaining

self-control. "Yes, I think that you will be able to do pretty well for yourself among the younger

set. I can see it now, the beautiful countess - " Suddenly Alex broke off. "Damnation!" He just

remembered that if Charlotte did have affairs with men, it would be put down to his impotency.

He felt as if a twining black snake had curled around his throat and was choking him to death.

Then Alex had an inspired idea. He wanted a nursemaid; now he had one. No reason Charlotte

should live in London. Forget the trip to Italy - they had nothing to celebrate. No, he would take

his new nursemaid to the country, in fact, farther than the country. He had an estate in Scotland.

They would go there, and the new whore he married could earn her keep. Then he'd go back to

London and leave her in Scotland. Maybe he would visit once a year.

He looked at her. Charlotte was staring at the ground, silent tears slipping down her face. For a

moment he had a flash of pity, but he ruthlessly thrust it away. Just so had Maria cried and

begged forgiveness for her past. Just so had she promised never to dally with another man again,

protested that his skill in bed was so great that she would be happy to stay with him all her days.

And only two weeks later he had walked in on her and his head footman, energetically

performing in the matrimonial bed. Alex's fists curled.

This time he would handle it better. His wife would live in Scotland, and he in London. She

could raise his illegitimate daughter, and he would never have to see her again. And damn

anyone who wondered why his wife lived in Scotland. He would set up a mistress and squelch

all the rumors about his potency - in fact, maybe he would sleep only with noblemen's wives.

Since he was an arrant cuckold, why not do the same to others? His eyes fired with purpose. Alex

took Charlotte's arm roughly and pushed her over toward their luggage, piled in the corner.

"Get packing," he said coldly. He rang the bell for Charlotte's maid. "We're leaving. Tell Marie to

wake up Pippa and Miss Helms."

Charlotte looked at him numbly. "I didn't sleep with other men!" she protested. "I only slept with

you, once, years ago!" Alex hardly listened. He strode out of the room without looking back.

Two minutes later there was a gentle knock and Marie entered, her eyes wide with shock. In an

instant she took in the picture of her sweet mistress, still clutching the remnants of her beautiful

gown, sobbing uncontrollably. At least he didn't seem to have injured her, Marie thought

practically. Well, well. Her mistress must not have had the virginity he wanted - or maybe she

just didn't have a maidenhead. Men are blockheads about such things.

She averted her eyes and began swiftly packing their bags, guessing that Charlotte needed some

time to collect herself. A few minutes later, Charlotte was still motionless in the center of the

floor. The door flew open and Alex stood there, flanked by his man, Keating. Marie shot a quick

look at Charlotte. She didn't seem to have noticed the men standing in the doorway. Marie darted

over and stood protectively in front of her mistress. Keating's eyes just as swiftly slanted off to

the corner. He's a good man, Marie thought with approval.

"Get my clothing out," Alex rasped at Keating. He jerked his head at his wife. "She can go in the

third carriage."

Marie swallowed. There was a serious breach between them, that was certain. The third carriage

was the servants' carriage. It followed the master's carriage and the carriage carrying Pippa and

her nanny. What would the servants do, having the mistress sitting among them? A look passed

between her and Keating and she closed her mouth. Keating was clearly staring at her in a

warning fashion, and the last thing she wanted was to be dismissed and leave her mistress alone

with this - this madman! She shielded Charlotte until both men exited, lowering her eyes

submissively as his lordship left. The great gallumping bastard, she thought after the door closed

behind them, Keating hoisting a pile of clothing and trailing a few cravats. Well, thank goodness

her Cecil had been chosen to accompany Charlotte to Italy. Cecil would sort out the footmen.

They would all have to ride pinion, that's all.

But Marie's fears were for naught. When she finally emerged, around an hour later, Alex's coach

was long gone, taking with him four footmen and his secretary. Keating had found the time to

organize all the servants. The footmen, Cecil told her, were to ride outside, six hanging on to the

back and the normal two in front. Keating would sit with the driver. Which would leave

Charlotte and Marie alone in the servants' coach. Marie nodded. She felt heartsick, unable even

to look at Cecil with much affection. What monsters men were. And what a monster her mistress

had married! Marie knew, with a deep heartfelt certainty, that Charlotte was a virgin. Why,

she'd been terrified when Marie prepared her for bed earlier that evening. Marie shook off her

thoughts, giving Cecil a brooding look, and started back to the inn.

A strong arm caught her around the waist.

"Here you!" a beloved voice said into her ear. "It's not my fault that the master is a raving

madman. We're all for her, you'll see."

Marie nodded. She headed into the inn. She had left Charlotte sitting in a tub of hot water. When

she got upstairs the water had cooled, but Charlotte was still sitting there, for all the world like:

an infant child, Marie thought. She finally managed to poke her mistress into some clothes.

Charlotte had stopped crying, but her white emotionless face shook Marie more than her crying

had.

Women who looked like that ... it wasn't good. She'd seen that look before, when her own mama

miscarried a baby.

Just then a loud screaming echoed in the hallway. "Sacreblu!" Marie said, startled into French. It

was Pippa, protesting her forced awakening at the top of her lungs. At that Charlotte walked

away from Marie, who was still buttoning up her traveling gown in the back. She opened the

door and said calmly. "Oh, Miss Helms." Pippa's nanny Katy looked back up the stairs, her hair

bundled wildly on her head. "I'll take Pippa." The countess reached out her arms. Kaity hesitated,

and then walked back up the stairs. Pippa caught sight of Charlotte, and gave an urgent sob.

"My not-nanny," she wailed.

"Here, darling," Charlotte crooned, cuddling her in her arms. "Let's go downstairs and get in the

coach, shall we? Mama will sing you a song, and you can go back to sleep again."

"Papa!" Pippa whimpered. "Want Papa."

"He can't be here right now," Charlotte said soothingly. "But Mama is here, and I'll sing you a

song about a frog, shall I?" On the stairs, the two other young

women, Marie and Katy, looked at

each other in surprise. Charlotte had never called herself "Mama" before. Yet Pippa seemed to

accept it without a tremor. She cuddled into Charlotte's arms, catching her breath but not sobbing

anymore.

Charlotte looked up at Marie. "I'm sorry, Marie. We seem to have changed our plans. Would you

mind bringing my brush to the coach please? You can do my hair there. I think we had better

follow his lordship now."

Marie went back into the bedroom to pick up the last few things strewn around the room,

bundling Charlotte's ruined nightgown into a bag. She didn't want to leave it in case the servant

who cleaned the room decided to sell the story to the gossip columns. Lord knows, all this upset

would be fodder enough for the papers.

But, in fact, no word of the changed plans of the Earl of Sheffield and Downes reached London.

Under Alex's instructions, Keating handed out a good deal of gold and a strongly worded threat

to each and every inn employee. He doubled the yearly salary of the eight footmen who

accompanied them to the inn. He paid the captain of the ship that was to take them to Italy triple

fare to keep silent about the disappearance of his passengers, and capped the money off with a

threat as well.

So while Charlotte's mother and father thought she was aboard a ship for Italy, in fact she and

Pippa were rattling slowly north. The two coaches Alex left behind were each pulled by two

horses instead of four, so the little cavalcade didn't travel very far in any given day. But that was

a blessing, Charlotte thought. Because Alex's coach was far, far ahead of them, and they didn't

have to worry about him.

In fact, as each day passed and her husband presumably drew farther ahead, Charlotte

deliberately slowed down their journey.

They took three-hour lunch breaks while she and Pippa rolled happily in the grass. They stopped

at any town that took her fancy and she sketched the church steeple, or gave a chortling Pippa a

bath. In short, she and Pippa got to know each other, and she grew calmer, gathering strength for

the moment when she would have to encounter her husband again. She felt more composed as

each day passed. She had a fairly good sense of what lay ahead. Alex had decided to dump her in

Scotland. The prospect didn't bother her too much. Let him think what he wanted. She was no

whore; she had slept only with her own husband.

But she would never, ever allow him in her bed again. Even the ecstasy, which she allowed

herself to remember only in her dreams, wasn't worth the acute sense of shame and horror that

had followed both of her sexual encounters with Alex. She didn't foresee a problem in that

respect: Alex had clearly said he would never sleep with her again. So Charlotte planned for a

solitary future in Scotland. Perhaps her parents could visit her next summer. There wasn't much

she regretted about leaving London, although she already missed Sophie acutely. And her

mother. More than anything, she would like to sob on her mother's shoulder.

But it wouldn't change anything, Charlotte counseled herself, as she rose from another

tear-filled night.

By the time the two coaches crossed the border into Scotland, the young, innocent girl who had

bumped into Alex on the stairs at Lady Prestlefield's ball was long gone. In her place was an

utterly collected, assured countess who was approachable only when she played with her little

girl.

"She's a proper lady, hain't she?" asked a red-haired urchin to his mother.

"Aw, she's a Sassenach, and don't you forget it!" she replied roughly. "Look at her

uppittyness! That sort never let down their hair. They're not like us-" Staring at the beautiful,

somehow icy English countess, the little boy nodded. She wasn't much like his chubby, beloved

mum, that's for sure. He clutched her around the waist in a sudden hug.

"Oh, Rickie, do give over!" She pushed off his arms. Just then a little girl hurled herself at the

countess, crying loudly. And the exquisitely dressed Englishwoman bent down and swung the

babe into her arms, smiling at her tenderly. Maybe they weren't so different, Megan thought.

Megan hailed her own son up for a hug and they stared together as the beautiful countess walked

off, her head bent close to her little daughter's Alex arrived at Dunston Castle, his estate in

Scotland, some ten days before Charlotte and her small entourage. He had spent the trip either

sitting alone in his coach or riding on Bucephalus, which he greatly preferred. In either situation

he cursed the fact that in his rage he had consigned Charlotte to the servants' coach. Why hadn't

he left her in his coach, where he could have railed at her to his heart's content? Then, slowly, a

feeling of mingled distaste and shame about his own behavior crept into his heart, and he was

glad that his wife was out of sight. But out of mind she was not.

Surges of rage still attacked him when he thought about Charlotte's deception, but he began to

regain an ability to analyze. One day he realized that he was allowing his still vibrant anger about

Maria's betrayals to cloud the situation with Charlotte. And after that perception it was only two

days until he sat bolt upright in the morning, Charlotte's voice echoing in his head.

"I didn't sleep with other men! I only slept with you, once, years ago!" And then there was

Charlotte talking about sex: "I didn't know . . . it was wonderful, so wonderful ... it wasn't at all

like the other time. No pain . . ."

So Charlotte wasn't quite the arrant betrayer that Maria had been. No, she had slept with only one

man, years ago - and she thought it had been him. It cast an ugly light on why she agreed to

marry him, but that didn't matter, Alex thought, consigning dreams of love to the fire. He was no

idiot. It was clear what had happened. Charlotte had slept with Patrick, and due to the unlucky

fact of Patrick being out of England when the two of them met, she believed she had lost her

virginity to him. Alex swallowed hard.

He and Patrick had shared women in the past . . . but never a wife. It was a hard thing to

contemplate. Still, if one had to marry under these circumstances, wasn't it better that the other

man had been one's twin? He thought about this for the last few days before Charlotte arrived,

calming his intense irritability by casting fishing lines into foggy Scottish streams and pulling out

trout that no one wanted to eat. So he threw them back. He spent hours staring at the gray-green

water as it rippled slightly in the wake of his line.

Probably the most surprising part of the last three weeks, he finally realized, was how much he

missed Pippa. For months he had been the primary person in her life - and then, in a fit of

petulant rage, he drove off and left her in a carriage with a nanny and a stepmother she barely

knew. And he missed her now, missed her with a deep visceral ache in his belly. He found

himself wondering in the middle of the night how she had gone to sleep the night after he left

without him twirling the curl on her forehead and telling her to have sweet dreams. If nothing

else, the Pippa ache told him that his scheme to bury Charlotte in Scotland wasn't a good one.

Unless he buried himself as well.

No, Alex thought grimly, he'd accept his wife. He would bring her back to London. They could

rub along pretty well together, now that he had given up his rosy illusions about falling in love

with the woman he married. They would have to go to bed together, because he needed an heir.

(That he was using the necessity of an heir as a justification, given the likelihood that Patrick

would have a child, was just barely hidden from Alex's consciousness.) He shook his fishing line

irritably. Where the hell was Charlotte? For the last two nights his mind had filled with the

alarming stories he'd recently heard about raiders lurking on the Scottish border, waiting to jump

on unsuspecting English travelers. God, why had he been such a hot-headed, arrogant brute?

What if Charlotte and Pippa were robbed, taken for ransom - or worse? Even as Charlotte's

carriage stopped, a mere two hours from Alex's estate, and the occupants ambled into a flowery

meadow for a leisurely lunch, Alex tortured himself by imagining a far cruder fate.

So when the two travel-stained carriages finally trundled through the huge stone walls marking

the entrance to the courtyard, Alex glimpsed them from his study window, and just barely

controlled himself from bounding down the stairs and pulling his wife and child into his arms.

Instead he stayed next to the window, rigidly braced against the sill. There came his wife, nimbly

stepping down from the third, rather shabby servants' carriage. Then the second carriage opened

and Pippa half-tumbled out, running over to Charlotte and holding up her arms. Alex couldn't

know that this had been the arrangement for the last two hours only; that normally Charlotte rode

in Pippa's coach. Pippa had tormented her nanny for the last hour, demanding her mama. He saw

Charlotte laughingly swing Pippa up into her arms, and Pippa wind her little arms around

Charlotte's neck and nuzzle her. This was what he had wanted, wasn't it? Time to go downstairs.

Alex walked down the twisting stone steps from his study, mentally bracing himself. He had

forgotten, in the intervening weeks, just how much Charlotte's beauty moved him. Even just the

sight of her trim bottom as she bent over to pick up Pippa sent a stab of lust to his groin. Well, all

the better, he reasoned, pacing calmly toward the entrance. She was his wife, after all. Maybe he

could keep her too busy to roam to other men.

He walked into the courtyard. Servants were pouring out of the

door, lining up for their formal

introduction to the new countess.

Charlotte was standing, Pippa in her arms, looking slightly amused. Her expression didn't change

when she saw him. She merely inclined her head a fraction of an inch and said, "My lord."

Alex looked at her thoughtfully. He inclined his head in response.

"Charlotte." There was silence in the courtyard. Pippa, who had been watching the horses over

Charlotte's shoulder, twisted her little self around. Alex smiled at her and held out his arms. But

rather than say "Papa" in her lovely Italian accent, or struggle to get down and run to him, as she

had to Charlotte, Pippa took one horrified look, twisted her free arm around Charlotte's neck and

burst into loud sobs.

"Sweetie," Charlotte said, "I told you Papa would come back. You see, Papa is here, and he

missed you, and he loves you very much. He didn't leave forever. Do you remember what I told

you?" There was no answer. Pippa just buried her face more tightly into Charlotte's neck. Alex

felt a burning red creep up his neck. His own daughter was rejecting him in front of some thirty

servants, all of whom were craning their necks to see what was happening.

Alex walked over to the two of them, his body rigidly disguising his impulse to pull Charlotte

into his arms and kiss her until she lost that distant look.

"Pumpkin," he said, his deep voice calm and persuasive. "I missed you very much. In fact, I

thought every night about how much I wished that I had never left you. But here I am, and I

would very much like a hug from my own pumpkin."

Pippa raised her tearstained face. "Papa?" she asked. Alex stooped down, ignoring the fact that

Charlotte drew back slightly as he came close. He rubbed noses with Pippa. She giggled and held

out her arms. "Papa," she said. "Papa!" The Italian accent was gone forever, Alex thought. But

the warmth of his daughter's small chunky body clinging to his was all that mattered. "I love you,

Pumpkin," he whispered into Pippa's neck. He forgot all the bystanders.

Charlotte stared at her husband. It was the old Alex, the premarriage Alex, the loving father she

had seen before their wedding night. A sense of relief filled Charlotte's heart. Besides her own

heartbreak, she had worried fiercely about Pippa. How could Pippa cope with the death of her

real mother, if her newfound papa decided to just ride off and leave her in Scotland? But perhaps

his plan wasn't quite so draconian as she had imagined. Alex and Pippa snuggled together,

seemingly oblivious of their audience.

Suddenly Alex swung up his head. His eyes ranged over the assembled servants. "This is your

new mistress, the Countess of Sheffield and Downes." He gave all the servants an arrogant stare;

he didn't want them to slight the new countess, having seen her descend from the servants' coach.

And wait until they heard stories from the footmen who arrived with her. Inside he groaned, but

his face remained haughty and confident. Then he smiled suddenly. "And this is my daughter,

Lady Philippa."

There was a resounding cheer and a flurry of clapped hands. Alex held out his free arm to

Charlotte. She took it lightly and he led her to the front of the line and began making painstaking

introductions to the primary servants of the estate.

For her part, Charlotte was delighted with herself. She felt nothing. After all the agony of the last

three weeks, she looked at Alex, her husband, and she felt nothing: neither attraction nor acute

rage. She felt a twinge of pity because he looked singularly drawn and tired. But seeing him

didn't sway her resolution one tiny bit, she was happy to find. Even as she smiled and chatted

with the servants, she inwardly gloated about the fact that his alarming effect on her, the inner

weakness that made her shake every time he so much as touched her finger, was gone. She was

holding his arm and she felt - nothing.

Finally Charlotte had met all the upstairs servants. She liked the butler enormously; judged that

one of the upper housemaids would probably have to be replaced; made a mental note to have the

housekeeper's records checked. Then she smiled generally at the mass of unnamed servants and

dropped Alex's arm. Side by side they walked up the four stone steps and into the front hall.

"My goodness," she exclaimed as they entered the echoing stone entrance.

"I inherited it through my great-grandmother," Alex said cheerfully. Now that he had Pippa in his

arms and Charlotte didn't seem to be looking at him as if he were a monster, he felt as if the

world was manageable once again. As soon as he had the chance, he would simply explain to

Charlotte that she had originally slept with his brother, but that he - Alex - had magnanimously

decided to forgive her for the lapse. He smiled to himself. This was the right way to behave. His

mother would have approved. His father - no.

His father would definitely have cast Charlotte off, or left her entombed in this Scottish castle in

the back of nowhere. But he wasn't like his father. He would have a marriage based on

magnanimity, even if not on love. In fact, Alex was practically glowing with virtue.

Unfortunately, his wife didn't seem to have noticed. She was wandering about, touching the

tapestries that lined the wide room. In fact, she seemed to be frowning over how dusty they were.

"Well," Charlotte said, meeting his eyes with no apparent self-consciousness. "I shall be in my

chamber until supper, my lord. Mrs.

McLean will show me the way, I am sure." Charlotte smiled at the plump housekeeper, waiting

by the stairs. "What time do you serve supper in Scotland?" Alex looked back at her, one

eyebrow unconsciously raised. His new wife was very cool. "At eight o'clock," he said.

"My lord," Charlotte repeated, and curtsied. Alex started. Of course, his parents used to salute

each other that way, but Charlotte had never curtsied to him before, except in the midst of a

dance. Slowly, he bowed.

Then suddenly Charlotte approached him, and his heart raced. But she merely stooped and

brushed Pippa's cheek with her lips.

"Mama!" Pippa said, and for a moment she managed to hook her

chubby little arm around her

mama's neck, bringing them so close together that Alex could smell Charlotte's orange-blossom

scent.

"No, sweetie," Charlotte said lovingly to Pippa. "You stay with your papa awhile. There's my

good pippin." Then she turned to Alex, and all the warmth fell from her face like magic, leaving

not hostility, but a calm detachment. "Whenever you wish, return Pippa to her nanny. She is quite

fond of Katy now."

An icy chill crept up Alex's spine. No, Charlotte didn't look at him as if she were angry. She

looked at him the way he had seen a hundred society dames look at their husbands: not enraged,

not even speculative, simply flatly uninterested. But very, very polite, he thought, as Charlotte

curtsied again and began climbing the stairs with Mrs. McLean. Without thinking he tightened

his grasp on Pippa until she gave a squawk of protest.

"All right, chicken. Let's go see the kittens in the stable, shall we?" Charlotte walked up the stairs

slowly, hardly hearing the details Mrs. McLean was pouring into her ear - the difficulty of

finding good servants, what happened to six pieces of the best china Tuesday last, the need for

new linen. She wasn't as impervious to Alex as she had hoped. When Pippa pulled her close she

had caught Alex's spicy male smell, and against her will her knees weakened.

Charlotte oversaw the transfer of her clothes out of the bedchamber adjoining the master

bedroom and into one far down the corridor next to the nursery

(the servants accepted without

comment her wish for better light), directed the arrangement of her paints in one of the four

corner tower rooms that was currently unused, and personally inspected Pippa's new nursery.

After scanning the room, Charlotte ordered another layer of carpets laid on top of those already

present. Pippa still spent a good deal of time crawling on the floor, and she didn't want her to

catch a creeping influenza from the damp, cold stone that made up the Castle floors.

Then she ordered a bath and lapsed into the steaming water, exhausted to the bone.

"Marie," she called out from behind the screens that protected the bathtub from the cruel drafts

which circulated in every room.

Marie was muttering to herself in French as she hung her mistress's gowns in the great wardrobe.

She didn't approve of Scottish castles, practically hanging off into a cloud of mist, this one was.

The damp! And what were they to wear? She had packed the mistress - and herself - for Italy.

And Italy this was not! "Marie!" Charlotte called again.

"I'm sorry, my lady." Marie's annoyed little face appeared between a gap in the screens. "Would

you like me to ring for more hot water?" "Yes, I would, thank you, Marie. And would you please

send a message to the earl, telling him that I intend to retire for the night and will simply have a

tray in my room? I am exhausted."

Marie didn't think much of hiding in one's bedroom; she thought Charlotte should go out there

and battle her husband. But looking at Charlotte's white face, she

had to agree. Perhaps it would

be better to take up cudgels tomorrow, when Charlotte had slept and looked her best.

"Of course, my lady. Should I instruct Mrs. McLean to call a seamstress to the castle tomorrow?

I'm afraid that we must have those wools that we bought in Glasgow made up into dresses as

soon as possible. You and Pippa will be down with colds in no time flat in this weather."

"That's a very good idea, Marie. When Pippa returns to the nursery, will you ask Katy to send her

in with me? I should like to have supper with her, please."

Marie busied away. She sent for more hot water, and had the fire in the fireplace built up so high

that sparks flooded up the chimney like fireflies caught in a draft. The room was warming up,

Charlotte thought. Thank goodness, this room was considerably smaller than those making up the

matrimonial suite down the hall. Out of the bath, she sat in a comfortable chair by the fire, so

tired that she couldn't even move. When Pippa was brought in she seemed just as drowsy, so they

sat together in the big chair and Charlotte told her a story about a horse who could fly, called

Peggy. Pegasus seemed a mouthful for a one-and-a-half-year-old girl.

After a while they had supper on a tray and Pippa was so tired that she didn't even try to toss any

food into the air. She just sat quietly on Charlotte's lap and opened her mouth docilely as

Charlotte popped in bits of food.

Finally Charlotte toppled her into Katy's arms and, pulling on a nightgown, crept into her warm

bed. Marie built up the fire one more time and left. Charlotte lay awake for a while, staring at the

fire as it danced in the grate, casting twisting shadows on the old stone walls. What was going to

happen to her and Alex? More important, perhaps, what did she want to have happen? Now that

they had met again, and all the hysterical fear she had that he would say something horrible, call

her a disgusting name in front of Pippa or the servants, had died down, she felt at sea. All her

energies had been directed toward controlling what she had thought would be a dreadful reunion,

with Alex shouting insults. Indeed, she had simply forecast an Alex as enraged as he had been

three weeks ago, on their wedding night. Despite herself, Charlotte's eyes filled with tears.

Maybe it was her fault. Maybe she should have summoned the courage, before they got married,

to detail exactly when they had met before. Instead, she had taken the coward's way out, and

believed her mother when she said no one would ever know she wasn't a virgin. Alex was right

in one regard: She had lied to him, at least by omission.

Because he had thought she was a virgin, and she wasn't. Charlotte sniffed. She had cried enough

in the last three weeks to sink a boat, she thought with a twist of wry irony.

So what did she want? She wanted . . . she wanted what she couldn't have. Alex before. An Alex

who had never said such awful things to her, who had never thought such ugly things about her.

Tears brimmed over again. But Charlotte was so tired that she couldn't even cry long; she slipped

into sleep between one sob and the next.

Meanwhile Alex dined in the same cold, regal splendor as he had for the last two weeks. He had

sent his secretary back to London as soon as they arrived, with instructions to return with warm

clothing. So Alex sat at one end of the vast table alone. The dining room in the castle was a

monstrosity, designed to be full of men at arms and barking dogs. The ten footmen ranged along

the side of the wall merely looked silly; in the old days, Alex thought, there were probably thirty

or forty servants dodging around many tables. And it was bitterly cold, summer or not. Alex

looked around in acute dislike. What was he doing here, in this drafty fortress? His old nurse

would have said that it was at the back of the north wind, it was so chilly.

He pushed away his food halfway through supper. Hell, he had a wife, didn't he? Why not talk to

her? He was tired of eating alone.

He walked upstairs, brushing past his surprised butler just as McDougal ushered in the fish

course. In his room Alex paused.

Should he knock on the adjoining door? Does one knock on one's own wife's door? After finding

Maria in bed with the footman, he always knocked on her door. Thinking of that, Alex sharply

pushed open the door to the adjoining chamber. But it opened to the same slightly dusty, empty

magnificence that had been taunting him for the last few weeks. The bed hangings were

moth-eaten. He had thought of having them cleaned for Charlotte, but forgot about it. Alex

quickly pulled his own bedroom door shut, realizing that all the heat from his fireplace was

escaping into the cold damp next door. So where the hell was his wife? He opened the door and

bellowed down the corridor.

"McDougal!" Silence punctuated the faint wail of wind in the corridor. He shouted again.

"McDougal!" Then he heard panting steps winding up the stairs.

"Yes, my lord," puffed his rotund butler.

"Where is the countess?" His narrowed eyes dared McDougal to be impertinent.

McDougal's face didn't shift a muscle. "She is in the north bedroom, my lord, being as she is

wishful for more light." He bowed and exited precipitously. McDougal had heard an

unexpurgated version of the events in Bournemouth from the countess's own maid, Marie, and he

didn't want to witness an explosion of the new earl's temper. Fakes seemed all right when he

visited here some four years ago - in fact, they had all been pleasantly surprised given that he

was an Englishman - but that was before he inherited. And turning into an earl could have a

perishing bad effect on a person's temper, McDougal knew.

Alex turned down the corridor to his left, wondering where in the deuce the north bedroom was.

More light, ha! In a bedroom with that name? He judged he was roughly facing north, so he

headed all the way up the corridor and grabbed the first door handle he saw. A wave of warmth

greeted him as he opened the door. He walked inside and closed the heavy wood behind him,

leaning against it. The room seemed to be empty. He was in a small bedroom that he didn't

remember even seeing on his last visit here.

There were windows on two sides, hung with thick red velvet curtains. Finally he walked over

and looked in the bed, the only place he couldn't see from the door. And there was his wife. She

was tucked under the covers, fast asleep.

For a moment or two Alex just stared at her. Charlotte's hair had grown from its fashionable short

cut; soft, dusky curls spilled down over her collar and lay rumpled behind her raised hand. From

what he could see, she wasn't wearing a temptress's gown tonight; there was a white ruffle

framing her face. Annoyed at himself for even thinking about her nightgown, Alex plumped

down on the bed and shook Charlotte's shoulder, rather roughly. She woke silently and stared at

him, her eyes black and shadowed by the only light, coming from the fireplace. Then she gasped

and instinctively pulled back.

Alex didn't move, but he was startled. Was she so afraid of him that she thought he might hit

her? In fact, Charlotte was shocked to see him. Her traitorous mind had spun her into a dream in

which Alex was begging forgiveness and kissing her breasts at the same time, and she had been

falling into a swooning whirlpool of desire - and then here he was; sitting on her bed. Staring at

her with an arrogant eyebrow raised. Her heart thumped in response to a flood of scorching

desire: to touch him, to reach out and pull him down to her, to kiss him sweetly, to tell him she . .

. And just as quickly, Charlotte's blood cooled. She was never going to be lured into acting like a

whore again. That much she would grant him: She responded to him in a way that no lady ever

would. Well, she was a lady, she reminded herself. Just because one's husband had a sensual

mouth that made butterflies skip in one's stomach was no excuse for losing control.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice as smooth as butter and about as warm.

"Looking for my wife," Alex responded. He was determined not to get angry. After all, he just

wanted a little companionship, and that was his marital right. There was no need for them to have

an argument about it.

"Why?" "Why not? It's lonely sitting down there at a table built for Scottish giants, all by

myself."

"I am very tired, my lord," Charlotte said evenly. "We traveled a long way today, and I would be

grateful if you would allow me to return to sleep."

"You traveled all of three hours," Alex retorted. "I asked Keating when I was trying to figure out

why it took you ten days longer than me to arrive here." He reached out and trailed a finger down

his wife's delicate cheekbone.

She flinched away from him and his eyes narrowed.

"We need to talk about our future," Alex said. "You see, I have decided to take you back. Under a

few conditions, the primary one being that you never sleep with another man beside myself. You

will do nothing to taint the reputation of my name. In return, I will not repudiate you for having

slept with my brother."

"I did not - " Alex raised his hand, cutting Charlotte off. "Apparently you lost your virginity to

my brother. However, no matter how unfortunate the joke on

both of us - had you waited a few

months, I suppose you could have married Patrick - we are the ones who are married now. And I

think we should make the best of it." He paused, but his wife didn't seem disposed to say

anything. She stared at the bedspread, her face shadowed.

"I will share your bed," Alex said with deliberate cruelty, "whenever I please. However, let me

repeat, no one else must share that bed with you, or I will banish you to this godforsaken place,

and I shall not summon you back to London until one of us is on our deathbed."

Then Charlotte realized that, in fact, they did need to talk. She pushed herself up in the bed,

resting against the backboard so she didn't feel so vulnerable. Then she folded her hands in her

lap, just as her mother did when she argued with her father.

"My lord," she said composedly, "it seems I must remind you of your own words in

Bournemouth. You said that you would never sleep with me again."

"Well, perhaps I won't sleep in this room. The bed is a trifle small for my taste, after all." Alex's

eyes devoured the gentle swell of Charlotte's breasts, even muffled as they were in folds of white

cotton.

It was Charlotte's turn to narrow her eyes. This man seemed to think that he could do anything he

wanted: be a monster one day and expect to seduce her the next.

"I refuse."

There was a moment of dangerous silence.

"You refuse? Exactly what do you refused" "I refuse to sleep with you, no matter how

euphemistically you might want to phrase it. Surely," she added with deadly irony, "as a whore I

should have the chance to choose my own clients."

"That's just what you don't have," her husband responded, his eyes gleaming coolly at her. "I'm

your husband. I can have you, whenever - and wherever - I please. And I think I please to have

you here, in this bed."

Charlotte thought about this for a moment. She knew that Alex had the right; she simply thought

he would never want to exercise it, given the utter disgust he exhibited on their wedding night.

Finally she gave a little shrug. He had probably realized that he needed an heir. But she'd be

damned if she would let him seduce her again and then savage her with insults.

"All right," she said. She reached under the covers and pulled up her nightgown to her waist,

pushing down the covers. Then she lay back and closed her eyes. Despite her calm exterior,

Charlotte was absolutely pulverized with terror. She had just done the boldest, most mad thing

she had ever done in her life. Here she was, totally vulnerable. The cool air brushed her thighs

and she shivered. Sex like this was going to hurt, she knew it intuitively. Her legs seemed to

have turned to a shaking mass of jelly.

Alex was staring at her incredulously. Silence descended on the room, broken only by flurries of

crackling sparks from the fireplace.

After a while Charlotte opened her eyes.

"Have you changed your mind?" Alexander Fakes was slowly finding that he was more angry

than he had ever been in his life.

"No," he breathed, with a harsh smile. "No, I haven't changed my mind." Charlotte closed her

eyes again, terrified by the look on Alex's face. For some reason this was making him look more

enraged - if that was possible - than he had been on their wedding night.

"What's the matter?" she asked, opening her eyes again.

"What's the matter," Alex repeated, his voice grating. "My wife lies there like a dead turnip and

asks me, 'What's the matter?' " "I don't know what you want," she said, just a little shakily. "Why

are you complaining?" Alex didn't reply. She is trying to get revenge, he realized suddenly. She's

angry about the things I said in Bournemouth. He stretched out his hand and ran it up the long,

sleek line of Charlotte's thigh. Then he reached under the nightgown and ran his hand up her

waist, over the silky ripple that was her ribs, stopping at the beginning of a womanly curve. The

intoxicating weight of her breasts made his blood beat furiously. If he couldn't seduce his own

wife, then he didn't deserve his earlship.

But by a half an hour later, he was ready to throw in the title, coronet and all. It wasn't that

Charlotte wasn't aroused: He knew she was. Her nipples . . . well, all of her was ready. But he

felt about as interested in proceeding as she seemed to be. What had happened to the girl who

strained forward to meet his touch? His conscience told him the answer to that. Revenge or not,

she was winning. Alex just didn't have the appetite to make love to a woman who lay there

passively, eyes closed, betraying only by tremors that what he did moved her.

"Open your eyes," Alex finally said, wearied to the bone.

Charlotte's eyes popped open. Alex was sitting on the edge of the bed, hunched over, head in his hands.

"What's the matter?" Charlotte asked again. She was genuinely bewildered. Wasn't this what he

wanted? His voice had resounded endlessly through her mind in the last weeks? - scorning her,

hating her, because she responded too much, because she "begged," he said.

Without answering Alex hoisted himself up and began to leave the room. But he was stopped by

Charlotte.

"Why are you leaving?" she demanded. "I don't understand you," she said, almost to herself.

"You called me a whore because I didn't act like a lady. You said you would never sleep with me

again, because you found out that I lost my virginity with you - whether you want to

acknowledge it or not - before we were married. And when I do act like a lady, you still look at

me in utter disgust. What is it?" Charlotte was working herself into a fine rage now, "If you want

an heir, make yourself an heir! Use my body; you said it was yours. I'm not stopping you! I am

behaving like a lady" To her surprise, Alex gave a genuine, if brief, bark of laughter. "Ladies

don't shout," he observed. But he sat down on the bed again. He looked at her seriously.

Charlotte's body reacted with a shock of alarm. It was the first time all evening that she had felt

in genuine danger. When he looked at her like that, her body grew hotly attentive. And he wasn't

even looking at her seductively; it's just that his eyes were dark and tender, like the old Alex, she

thought wistfully. The before-Alex, who still liked her and didn't think she was a whore. The

thought gave her a burst of renewed fortitude. This was what he wanted. She had behaved just as

a lady should, no matter how difficult it was. So why did it bother him now? "I'm sorry," Alex

said heavily. "I'm sorry I called you a whore. I realized, a few days later, that you had only lost

your virginity to a man you thought was me. I didn't understand it at the time, and I was so

enraged that I couldn't ... I couldn't control my temper."

"It was you," Charlotte persisted. "It was you, three years ago in -" Alex raised his hand,

protesting. "I really don't want to know the details," he said, shuddering a bit. "For God's sake, it's

hard enough for me to accept the fact that my bride slept first with my brother: I definitely don't

want to know on what back step he did it!" His mouth twisted ironically. "We share many things,

but your virginity ... I'll leave it to him."

Charlotte felt sick. He would never believe her; she could see it in his eyes. And so he would

always think those ugly things of her.

She closed her eyes again. Maybe it would be better to stay here, to live in Scotland. She didn't

know if she could bear to see Alex every day, knowing that he despised her. Even after all his

brutal talk, his face was still so dear. It was just too painful. A tear escaped under her closed

eyelids.

Alex looked at his wife somberly. She was sorry, clearly. He had no real belief that she would

ever sleep with another man. No, Charlotte was a true, loyal person. He picked up her hand and

kissed the palm.

"Shall we try again?" Charlotte wet her trembling lips with her tongue, and Alex felt an

immediate lick of fire in his belly. She had the most enticing lips, his wife. They were a deep,

dark cherry color, with the promise of passion. Passion she had displayed, he thought. He just

had to figure out how to get her to reveal it again.

"Ah, what do you mean?" Charlotte enquired. Something about the way Alex's eyes were looking

at her was setting off alarm bells.

Little nerves woke up in her legs; her breasts suddenly longed to be touched.

"Let's make love again," Alex said, moving up the bed so he could bend down and brush his lips

across hers. "I'm sorry I went insane afterward. I never experienced anything so wonderful, and I

simply exploded when I found out I wasn't the only one. But that's in the past now. We should

think about . . . about making an heir," he said with a deep chuckle.

Charlotte dismissed a pang of disappointment. Of course he wanted an heir. It was natural.

His mouth was just a hairbreadth from hers now. She could feel his warm breath, and then his

tongue ran across her lips like liquid silver, icy and warm at the same time. His hand started to

run slowly up, under her nightgown again. Maybe it wouldn't be

so bad to kiss him back,

Charlotte desperately reasoned with herself, even as her body began to tremble with desire.

Alex raised his mouth and looked deeply into her eyes. "Please, darling," he whispered, and

Charlotte's resistance fell into a hundred splintered pieces. She wound her arms around his neck

and raised her mouth to his, her lips already slightly parted, evocative of surrender. And Alex

instantly took the implicit invitation, jerking her against his hard chest, driving his tongue into

her mouth. His hand slipped naturally to cup the tantalizing weight of her breasts. And when he

heard her sharp gasp, it filled his heart with pleasure. His Charlotte was back - more than back.

By now he was stretched out beside her and when he began removing the studs from his shirt,

Charlotte tremblingly ran her hands over his chest, her fingertips lingering on his nipples. Little

jolts of fire ran up her limbs when his eyes widened with obvious pleasure. When she

experimentally lowered her head and put her tongue on his chest, he moaned out loud and

Charlotte's belly ignited into a fevered, flaming ocean.

Some time later they were both naked, their bodies glowing in reflected firelight, flushed skin

meeting flushed skin, frenzied kiss following kiss. Alex's hands wandered all over Charlotte's

body, igniting every inch. But it wasn't until Alex poised himself over her, bracing himself on his

forearms, and began deliberately, tormentingly rubbing himself against her that Charlotte felt

herself truly losing control. She shut her eyes tight, not even opening them when Alex's tongue

teasingly ran across her eyelids. Alex was concentrating, thinking dimly of holding himself under

strict control and making it up to Charlotte. He didn't notice that her closed eyes signaled

distress. He pushed into her a little way. Then he withdrew and circled her again, luring, calling.

Charlotte's hips involuntarily lifted, pressing against him. Despite herself, her eyes flew open and

she wreathed her arms around his neck, silently pleading for what she could not bring herself to

say. And still Alex teased . . . breaching her a little farther, pulling back until she was ready to

scream. And then, just when Charlotte was about to explode with longing and frustration, Alex

drove into her forcefully.

Charlotte's mind went blank and she cried out; and Alex - who had been counseling himself

sternly about not losing control - immediately lost all control. He rammed into her again and

again, evoking fluttering cries from his wife.

But something wasn't right. Slowly Alex pulled his consciousness back from his mindless

plunging into the hot, tight warmth of Charlotte's body. Now he saw that tears were seeping out

beneath her closed eyelids. Even as her body arched to meet each stroke, she wept. He stilled his

body instantly, forcing his throbbing manhood to lie quiescent inside her.

"Darling," he whispered. "What is it? Does it hurt?" Charlotte's eyes opened, huge,

tear-drenched. He kissed away the tears, but she turned her head away.

"What is it, Charlotte?" Alex's strong hand pulled her chin back, so he could see her eyes.

"I can't, I can't not," her breath caught on a sob.

"Can't not what?" Alex prompted.

"I can't stop myself." More tears flooded out now. Alex gently withdrew himself and pulled a

handkerchief from the table, blotting Charlotte's tears.

"What are you talking about, sweetheart?" he finally prompted when it appeared she wasn't going

to continue.

"You said, you said that no lady acts the way I did." Charlotte was crying hopelessly now, her

voice broken by sobs. "You said that you had never heard of a lady p-panting, or begging for it,

the way I did."

Alex's heart stopped. Had he really said anything so cruel? God, he couldn't have. In a fit of

stupid rage he might have ruined the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him.

"Charlotte," he said fiercely. "I was an idiot, do you hear me? An idiot. I was off my head, insane

with jealousy. I wanted to hurt your feelings, and so I said the crudest thing I could think of, but I

didn't mean it. I didn't mean it," he repeated desperately as Charlotte kept crying.

"I just can't stop myself," she finally said in a ragged voice. "You were right. I'm not a lady; I'm a

..." but she couldn't bring herself to say the ugly word, tears welling up in her eyes again.

"Oh, God, Charlotte," Alex groaned, pulling her into his arms. "Please, please listen to me. If you

withdraw from me now, because of the stupid, cruel things I said, it will be the death of me. I

will have destroyed the one thing I dreamed of: a passionate, loving relationship with my wife.

"Listen to me, Charlotte!" He bent commandingly over her, forcing her to meet his eyes. "Do you

think I sound like a whore when I almost shout every time you touch me? When I am panting,

and grunting, and making every ungentlemanly noise I can? Do I repulse you? Do I?" Charlotte

shook her head numbly.

"How does it make you feel when I moan at your touch?" Alex asked, more quiedy.

A slight smile touched Charlotte's lips. "Like a queen," she said.

"I want to be king, Charlotte, king in my own house. Please, darling, please let me be king and

you be queen. Nothing you could possibly do when we make love could ever disgust me. It was

just rage speaking, not my genuine feelings."

Charlotte's lips quivered. "But what if you get angry at me again?" She drew in a shaky breath. "I

know you're right; I don't behave like a lady. And I would rather not risk your rage again."

Alex rolled over to lie on his back. This was a facer. He had ruined everything. He hadn't trusted

her; well, now she would never trust him. And that was the end of his dream of an erotic marital

union, born of the encounter in the garden years ago, and nurtured stubbornly even during the

awful years with Maria. It was over. He stared up at the stone ceiling, his mind hollow.

Then he felt a warm naked body press against his side, and a tousled curly head pressed against

his chin.

"Shall we try again?" At first he didn't understand her whisper, and then he remembered his

question. He had asked it only an hour or so ago, but it felt like a

century. He turned his head

slowly. His wife was looking at him, her beautiful dark eyes no longer brimming with tears.

Charlotte pressed her fingers against his mouth. "If you promise to trust me," she said shakily,

but oh so sweetly, "I promise to trust you. If you believe me, I will believe you about this. I will

never sleep with any man other than you in my life, as God's my witness, and if you will promise

never to reproach me with my behavior when we make love . . . well, I will simply resign myself

to behaving like a harlot - at times."

The gleam of amusement in her eyes evaporated as her husband rolled over, grabbing her in his

arms and entering her with one swift, almost brutal stroke. Charlotte spontaneously cried out, her

body throbbing with joy, her hands clutching his shoulders.

The night was very long. Alex left the bed only to pile more wood on the fire. They made love

and slept; Charlotte woke up to find that a burgeoning presence was demanding to enter her

body. Her immediate welcome made Alex's breath catch and he buried his face in her throat,

hoarsely stating that he didn't deserve her. But when his wife started to tickle him in unusual

places . . . well, his mind couldn't concentrate on its well-deserved self-reproach. He retaliated,

and they finally went back to sleep, replete.

Except that Alex woke up again, some two hours later. Charlotte was deep in the sleep of the

utterly exhausted next to him. He swore to himself that he wouldn't wake her, but then he

irresistibly drew off her coverlet and looked at the elegant lines

of her body.

She was his, all his. And when Charlotte awoke, languorously returning to the world, she first

shrieked in disbelief, and then in utter, abandoned pleasure. Alex's dark head was between her

thighs and his tongue forced streaks of mindless bliss to rocket through her body.

So the night was long, but it was not, as wise men say, without its rewards. Morning light first

slanted below the velvet curtains around six in the morning. In time the lines of warm sunlight

crept closer to the end of the bed. They found the Earl, and the Countess, of Sheffield and

Downes sleeping the sleep of the just, the exhausted, the newly married, and the thoroughly

sated.

Chapter The next two weeks were long remembered in the history of Dunston Castle, Scotland,

the seat of four successive Earls of Sheffield and Downes. In fact, the castle's butler, Mr.

McDougal, confided to his wife that there'd been nothing like it since the third earl, the present

earl's father, he punctiliously explained, brought a young woman up to stay for a week. She was

no better than she should be, obviously, and the antics they had to put up with! There was the

time they found the dining room door locked, for example, just as Mr. McDougal was about to

bring in a flaming tart, himself being just an upper footman at the time. The tart was ordered

special, McDougal recalled, the cook not being used to fancy continental dishes that had to be set

on fire. And wasn't she in a tizzy when the whole thing had to be brought back to the kitchen,

blackened and frizzled? And there was a young second housemaid who learned entirely too much

when she innocently went to dust the music room - and what did she find? His wife nodded

knowingly as Mr. McDougal wagged his eyebrows.

"I was just a young one then," he said. "But I well remember the hysterics she had in the kitchen.

Such an uproar! The cook finally had to give her a good shot of the cooking brandy, since the

butler-that-was, old Grimthorple, was rather tight with the key to the spirits cabinet. Ah, well."

"I don't rightly think that this earl should be compared to his father," said his wife comfortably.

She ran the laundry, linens, and weaving section of the Castle operations, and what she didn't

know about Castle occupants wasn't worth knowing. "These two are sweet on each other and

newly married. And the countess is no slip of a girl. Even if one does see them kissing now and

again, she is always respectful and courteous to me."

"And Ira," she told her husband for the third time, "you could have knocked me over with a

feather when she came to me and said, 'Mrs. McDougal, I have found a few slight

indiscrepancies in the housekeeping records, and I wondered if you might help me understand

them?' Ira, you could have knocked me over with a feather. That Mrs. McLean - some

housekeeper she is! - has been filching linens from my very cupboards practically as long as

she's been here, and no one has taken a bit of notice. You can tell our lady has been brought up

the right way."

Mr. McDougal acknowledged that he too liked the young countess: Who would not, given her

kindly, sweet manner? But he ventured to say that he shouldn't like his daughter to be seen

kissing her husband in back of every statue in the gardens, and hadn't Mrs. McDougal told him

herself that the countess's French maid said she was spending most of her time sewing buttons

back on her mistress's clothing? "She's French," Mrs. McDougal replied, assessing the evidence

of a Frenchwoman at a very low rate indeed. "But even if Marie were telling the truth, what's the

matter with a few buttons lost between a man and his wife, eh,

Ira?" Her husband chuckled

appropriately and talk passed to other things.

Meanwhile the master of the castle kissed his wife behind statues, scattered small pearl buttons

around the matrimonial bedchambers, and played with his child in the castle garden. And when

the time came for the family to travel back to England, the three large coaches stayed together, if

only because Pippa switched frequently between her mama and papa's coach and that of her own

dear nanny. So the coaches wound toward London as slowly as the servants' coach had found its

way up, and Charlotte buried memories of tearful nights by romping half the night with her

husband in the same inns.

No one who saw the young countess on the way back to England, rather than on the way to

Scotland, could have said she looked distant or snobbish. Due to Pippa's frequent presence in the

coach, Charlotte often looked rumpled; but if the truth be told, even when Pippa was not in their

coach, her husband took over the job of rumpling her himself.

The day after the first coach, drawn by four prancing steeds, drew up before Sheffield House in

Albemarle Square, Sophie York swept past the butler with an airy "Charlotte expects me."

"So," Sophie demanded impudently. "Tell me all. How is married life?" Charlotte blushed.

"That good?" Sophie asked, laughing.

"What has happened to you in the last two months?" Charlotte asked.

Sophie twinkled at her, just to show that she noticed Charlotte's evasion, and then she wound into

a long tale of Braddon Chatwin's pursuit (having missed his chance with the one reigning beauty,

Charlotte, he had adroitly turned to the other, Sophie). Charlotte alternately laughed and choked.

In fact, she found herself wondering whether she had missed most of Sophie's jokes before she

got married. Would she have understood Sophie's joke about the newlywed Lady Cucklesham,

who married for money and then wore her maidenhead on her finger in the likeness of a large

diamond? "Were I minded to be the wife of a fool," Sophie said a little moodily, "I couldn't do

better than Braddon. He would never bother to question what I was about: He's eternally

good-natured and discreet. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's ungentlemanly behavior."

She gave a little shudder.

Charlotte looked at her friend sympathetically. Everyone knew that the Marquis of Brandenburg

could not resist a Frenchwoman, particularly when he drank overmuch.

"Don't do it, Sophie," she urged, a little surprised at her own fervency.

"Why ever not?" "Because ... it is wonderful being married to a man who isn't a fool."

"They are all fools," Sophie said rather shortly. Then she smiled wryly at Charlotte. "I don't mean

to take away from your married bliss. But in my experience - granted, only gained by

observation, but none the worse for that - in my experience, even the best men take to foolish

behavior like a duck to water."

"Still," Charlotte persisted. "You could find a fool whom you like more than you like Braddon."

"That's just it. I do like him. He reminds me of the little brother I used to wish I had. I spent hours

sitting in the nursery, which was just above my parents' bedroom. And I could hear my parents

yelling at each other; my mother used to care a good deal more about my father's inability to

resist a lovely Frenchwoman than she does at this point. I would wish and wish that I had a little

brother: someone uncomplicated and loving. And Braddon is like that, Charlotte. He's very

uncomplicated. I know he's loving - I overheard Sir Bredbeck say that Braddon has more

mistresses depending on him than a lawyer has cases. Although, to do him justice, he keeps his

mistresses out of the ballroom."

Charlotte involuntarily giggled, even as she winced at the sad image Sophie offered of her

childhood.

"But, Sophie, you can't have children with someone who is like a little brother!" "I want to marry

someone who will be - a pleasant acquaintance. That strikes me as the best kind of ton

marriage." Sophie said.

Then she brightened. "Have you heard how well your protegee, Chloe van Stork, is doing? I vow,

that girl is in a fair way to claiming some of my suitors! Not that I mind. She could even have

Braddon but the gossips suggest she is waiting for Will Holland."

Charlotte thought back to her wedding ball. "Chloe liked him very much," she said.

"Well, she doesn't show any signs of grief, although he's still in the country. She has four or five

constant beaux - they accompany her everywhere, hanging from

her every word. I hear that they

are betting in the clubs that she will take Lord Winkle."

"I'm glad," Charlotte said decisively. "She's a lovely girl and she deserves to be admired."

As Sophie chattered on about the particular snub that Lady Skiffing dealt Camilla Prebworth, the

wife of Captain Prebworth, Charlotte's mind wandered to Alex. She knew exactly where he was:

He had been pulled into his study by his long-suffering secretary, Robert Lowe, to deal with the

correspondence that had built up over the last months.

Just then her husband appeared at the door, and Charlotte's face unknowingly lit up.

"Alex!" she cried, springing up from her chair.

Alex winked at Sophie, whom he had come to like a great deal over the two insufferably long

months of his engagement, took his wife in his arms and slowly, deliberately, backed out of the

door of the salon.

Sophie's clear laughter echoed after them as Alex stood in the marble hallway of Sheffield

House, passionately kissing his bride until her knees trembled and she clutched the front of his

coat.

"Alex, we have to go back into the salon," she whispered. "I can't just leave Sophie alone like

this. It's too impolite."

"Swear that you'll meet me in one hour, in our chambers."

"I shall not."

"Swear that you will or I won't let you return." Alex traced a fiery path down Charlotte's throat to

the rapidly beating pulse at its base.

He licked it, and she almost moaned out loud.

"Alex!" "Swear!" "No. I have an appointment to visit Monsieur Careme in two hours."

"I'll get you there," Alex promised hoarsely. "I'll drive you in the phaeton." He showed every sign

of going even lower in his outrageous kissing.

"I swear," Charlotte finally gasped.

But her husband wasn't listening. Having ascertained that there were no footmen stationed in the

hallway at the moment, Alex was craftily trying to maneuver his wife against the wall. The

moment he had her back to the wall he crushed his body against hers, thrusting his knee between

her legs and grinning down at her wickedly. His hands swept down her back and cupped her

buttocks, pulling her up against his erection. Charlotte's bottom was so curved and delicious that

Alex could have wept.

The next second his wife pushed him away indignantly, although Alex noted with satisfaction

that her hands were trembling and her cheeks were deeply rosy.

"Alex!" Charlotte snapped.

She whisked into the salon where she had left Sophie. Sophie was peacefully eating lemon

wafers and drinking tea. She laughed out loud when she saw Charlotte. Charlotte's hair looked as

if she had been in a high breeze; even the vagaries of Monsieur Pamplemousse's fashionable

haircut couldn't explain the countess's current look.

Alex didn't seem to have followed her, so Sophie felt free to comment on the situation. In fact,

Alex was staring at the Oriental birds that adorned the wallpaper in the hallway and waiting for

his rigid arousal to subside. These knitted pantaloons really were inadequate, he thought glumly.

At least for the kind of raging lust he felt for his wife. A tiny grin crept over his face.

"Does he kiss well?" Sophie asked. "You know I deserve an answer, given that you simply

deserted me."

Alex inched a little closer to the open door. Surely it wasn't eavesdropping when the subject was

as important as this one.

Charlotte gasped and then laughed. "Yes, he does," she replied. "He only has to kiss me and I - "

she broke off, shrugging her shoulders.

"You what?" Sophie asked. Sophie knew a great many sophisticated jokes about erotic matters,

but she didn't, in fact, see much point in carnal relations.

"Well, I just melt, that's all."

"It sounds like such an uncomfortable encounter," Sophie said.

"Mind you, I'm not quite sure I understand exactly what happens - but please don't feel you have

to tell me, Charlotte. While I feel certain that my mother will never get around to explaining the

facts, at some point I'm going to accept one of these dunces who are courting me, and I'm sure

he'll explain the whole awkward business."

Charlotte turned even pinker, if that was possible. "Well, it is awkward, but it's rather

magnificent too."

Sophie looked at her curiously. "My mother told me that marital relations are a matter of extreme

discomfort, and must be endured in return for one's place in society."

"That's not . . . it's not like that with Alex."

"Just my luck," Sophie said gloomily. "You take the one man in London who has any idea how to

make the business comfortable, and I'm left with old Braddon. I'm sure he would explain it to me

by reference to his stables. Sometimes I think he considers me to be prime bloodstock, just like

his best mares."

"It's more than comfortable," Charlotte burst out. She was dying to tell someone, and she couldn't

discuss it with her mama. "It's actually rather - glorious. Sometimes it's the only thing I can think

about, all day," she confided.

Sophie was staring at her, blue eyes wide. "Maybe I shouldn't marry Braddon," she finally said. "I

am quite sure that I would never think about him all day, no matter how he kissed. Does your

husband kiss better than Will Holland does - or did?" Charlotte blushed again. Sophie thought

they were talking about kissing, and she had been talking about . . . She probably shouldn't

discuss anything like this with an unmarried woman. Sophie seemed so sophisticated, but she

obviously wasn't.

"What do you mean 'did?' " Charlotte replied, adroitly changing the subject. "Isn't Will kissing

anymore?" Out in the hallway Alex leaned his head back against the wall. There was no way he

could ever join them in the salon. Hearing Charlotte's confession that she thought about sex

during the day had made him harder than a rock. He groaned and set off toward his study. He

might as well go through the rest of his correspondence. Given

that he wasn't going to be able to

do anything intelligent until Charlotte met him an hour hence, the least he could do was make

Robert happy.

Another month passed. The London season was drawing to a close. Charlotte's and Alex's lives

had fallen into a comfortable pattern. Charlotte painted in the morning. She embarked on a

portrait of one of the kitchen maids, a large, bony girl named Mall who'd grown up near the

Welsh border. At first the countess and the kitchen girl regarded each other circumspectly; Mall's

certainty that her mistress was stark-raving mad didn't make sittings any more comfortable. But

Charlotte persisted. Ever since she had seen Mall's face when she restocked the fireplace one

morning she had wanted to paint her. After a while they became friends, and Charlotte learned all

about Mall's seven brothers and sisters, and even some gossip about the staff. The butler, Staple,

for instance - he sounded like a veritable tyrant. And if she understood Mall's marked Welsh

brogue correctly, he wasn't behaving as he ought to around the younger female staff, either. That

very night Charlotte dismissed Staple, who seemed inclined to argue about it. But Charlotte was

not the daughter of the Duchess of Calverstill for nothing. She drew herself up and gave him a

duchess look, a stiff-necked, extremely unpleasant look. And Staple found himself walking right

out of the room, willy-nilly.

Charlotte wrote a note to Mr. McDougal in Dunston Castle. Would he and Mrs. McDougal like

to move to London? Since there was no housekeeper at the moment in Sheffield House, they

would both be more than welcome. Charlotte named a salary well in excess of Staple's.

While she was painting, Alex worked in his study. In the first few weeks after they returned to

London he used to wander into her studio and read a book on the days when she didn't actually

have Mall sitting with her, but after a while Charlotte banished him. Not only could she not

concentrate properly with him in the room, but he consistently put down his book and sprang on

her.

"Like a tiger with its prey," Charlotte complained.

"It's not my fault," Alex said, grabbing his prey. "You have wanton eyes. You look at me over

your easel and I know that you are silently begging me to caress you."

"If you do it only for me, you can leave off," Charlotte said pettishly. "I was thinking of my work,

not of you."

"You can't fool me. You had such a melting look around your mouth. ..."

"Why don't you go fence with Lucien? You can play your games with him!" "Because," her

husband growled, "I like private play, at private houses. This house." And with that he bore her

off to the old settee in the corner, and there was another morning lost. So she banned him from

the studio, and he took to fencing with Lucien every morning.

"I have to do something" Alex would complain. But Charlotte knew he loved the rough

maleness of the fencing studios, the sharp give and take of insults that accompanied fencing

matches. He always came back to the house glowing - and ready to lure her upstairs.

In the afternoon Charlotte played with Pippa, and in the evenings she and Alex went to the usual

round of balls. Even if Charlotte occasionally affected a fashionable air of weary sophistication,

she enjoyed balls as she never had before. There was nothing as delicious as meeting your own

husband unexpectedly in a hallway, and having him whisper a

promise in your ear that made you

rosy-pink for the next hour. Or having your husband pull you so close during a waltz that people

whispered - but we are married, Alex would reassure her. Or he would smile at her devilishly

and say, "Let's do something for the benefit of my reputation," and kiss her right there, on the dance floor.

By the time Charlotte had been married four months, she was certain of two things. One was that

she wasn't pregnant yet, and she would have to inform her husband of this signal fact (thereby

curbing their joyful and button-liberating nightly activities), and the second was that she was

falling, or had fallen, deeply, irrevocably in love with her husband. Her heart danced to see him;

she was diminished when he wasn't in the room. Whenever they made love, the words almost

burst out of her mouth, but she stopped them.

What had he said when he asked her to marry him? Love was built from trust. And she wasn't

sure he trusted her yet. Her mind wove into tangled, tiresome explanations of why she shouldn't

tell him. But the truth was, she was a little afraid. He said so bluntly that he didn't love her,

before. Charlotte felt shy, and vulnerable, and . . . well, as if she would rather not be the first to

say "I love you." What if Alex thought she was trying to bribe him, to make him forget that she

didn't tell him about her lack of virginity? So she kept silent, and when she felt most like saying

"I love you," she covered his face with passionate kisses instead, or offered to rub his back until

he went to sleep. And then when she was quite sure he was fast asleep she would whisper "I love

you" into his thick curls or against the rock-hard surface of his chest. The tension would drain out

of her until the next time she caught sight of him laughing and found herself fighting the impulse

again.

That night Alex found himself up against the ladylike training that Charlotte was, generally

speaking, ready to toss to the side. But not tonight. In fact, she had secretly thought she was

pregnant, since she hadn't had her flux during their entire married life, but it started that morning.

And Charlotte was determined to follow her mama's outlines regarding just this contingency.

"No!" she said, looking at Alex in fascinated horror.

"Why not?" her husband said in his sweetest tones, kissing her neck. "Six more days?" Alex

asked against her lips. "Six more days, Charlotte? I can't make it; I can't live through it."

Charlotte didn't dare answer. Her whole traitorous body was urging her to give in but she

wouldn't, she wouldn't.

"I will not," she finally said. "I'm really serious, Alex. Perhaps I'd better sleep in the other room

tonight."

"Oh, no," Alex said hastily, giving up. He had no real hope, but he certainly didn't intend to forgo

Charlotte's sweet, curvaceous self lying next to him in the bed. Later he managed to reduce his

wife to a flushed, longing beauty without even getting her long white nightgown above her knees,

but still she was adamant.

"Six more nights," she said firmly. "Seven days is what my mama said, and I'm sure she's right

about this. Perhaps I should go sleep in the other room."

Alex rolled over on top of Charlotte hastily, just in case she was really thinking about getting out

of bed. He rubbed her nose gently with his, exactly as they both often did with Pippa. "I love

being married to you, do you know?" His dark eyes stared down into hers as if they looked to the

bottom of her soul. That's almost like saying "I love you," Charlotte thought.

The next morning Alex was sulky as a bear at breakfast, and then suddenly made a wry grimace

at Charlotte.

"Is it just me?" "I feel as if someone dumped itching powder on my head," his wife replied,

smiling.

"Well, at least I'm not alone." Alex returned to the newspaper and then strode off to his study.

Later that morning he uttered a muffled curse and dropped the piece of paper he was holding.

Robert looked at him sympathetically. Then he moved forward and handed his master a heavy,

embossed envelope marked Department of Foreign Affairs across the top.

"There's this one too," he said.

Alex read the message and let out a loud, heartfelt "Damnation!" Any other time he would be

delighted with the invitation contained in these pages - invitation? Command, more like, he

thought, his eyes skittering over the elegantly scripted letter from Lord Breksby, the Secretary for

Foreign Affairs. He couldn't leave Charlotte now, he thought, his

blood heating at the very
thought of her.

But he couldn't bring her; it was far too dangerous. He crumpled
the heavy parchment in his hand
and threw it violently into the corner.

"Send around a message telling that fellow that I will wait on him
at four o'clock this afternoon,"

he barked at Robert. "And tell Lucien I will be at his house at
five." Then Alex strode out of the
study.

Alex tracked Charlotte down in her studio. She was frowning
over the portrait of the third

kitchen maid. Sophie was sitting with her and regaling her with
Braddon's latest marriage

proposal, attempted while they were both riding in Hyde Park.

"Was there something unpleasant in your correspondence?"
Charlotte rang the bell for tea. She

wasn't sure whether her husband looked so glowering because of
last night, or due to another

reason.

"I don't want tea," Alex said impatiently. "Tell the maid to bring
me some brandy."

Charlotte came back to the divan, her eyes puzzled. Alex rarely
drank in the afternoon. But he

clearly didn't want to discuss the problem. Sophie, with her ever-
present sensitivity to the

moodiness of the male sex, was already gathering up her wrap
and talking lightly of seeing them

tonight at Lady Combe's ball.

Charlotte and Alex arrived at Lady Combe's ball late that evening.
Even for a couple who had

shocked and delighted the ton by their shamelessly affectionate
behavior, their conduct at Lady

Combe's ball was outrageous. For example, the countess was waltzing with the Honorable

Sylvester Bredbeck when her husband simply barged onto the dance floor and swung her into his

arms, without even a word of warning. All he did was grin at Sylvester - who took it very well,

everyone thought - and announce that he had to hold his wife now. Hold his wife indeed! That

wasn't something married people said about each other, as Lady Skiffing punctiliously pointed

out.

And then the way they danced! Needless to say, there was no light visible between their bodies.

Intriguingly, Lady Prestlefield swore that later that evening she saw the two of them having a

squabble on a balcony. The Earl of Sheffield and Downes had his face buried in his wife's hair,

but she looked fit to be tied, Lady Prestlefield recounted with relish.

She was more than fit to be tied. Charlotte was enraged and terrified by turns. Alex was setting

off on one of the most foolish, quixotic journeys she had ever heard of. Who cared if he had

perfect Italian and could pass as an Italian? No one in their right mind would venture to spy on

the French, given the fragile truce holding between Napoleon and the English government. As for

Lucien! She always liked her husband's friend before; in fact, ever since she realized at the picnic

that Lucien had lost both wife and child in France, she had felt tenderly affectionate toward him.

But now! If he dared to present himself to her, she would say something horrible to him.

"And don't tell me this is just female scruples, Alex!" she flashed

at her husband later that night.

"No one with the slightest consideration for your well-being would ask you to do such a thing.

Go to France! Pretend to be Italian! Look for some girl who has likely, poor thing, been

discovered and guillotined, and then try to get you both out of the country. Let alone traveling

with a well-known French count - it will get you guillotined in a minute!" Charlotte rigidly

controlled her tears.

"Lucien won't be with me," Alex explained patiently. "He'll be waiting in a boat off the shore of

France. It would be too dangerous for him to enter the country. But Charlotte, there's more than a

chance that we can rescue Lucien and Daphne's little sister. How can I deny that request? It's a

simple thing, after all. Italians are free to travel throughout France. I simply enter the country as a

prosperous merchant, travel a short way over the border, pick up this girl in the milliner's shop,

and there we are. You mustn't worry too much, love. Paris is full of Englishmen at the moment:

Remember, we signed a peace agreement with Napoleon."

"No, Alex, no," Charlotte said chokingly, winding her arms around his neck. "It's too dangerous.

You can't leave me and Pippa. You can't! I'll die without you."

"Listen, darling." Alex drew back and looked down into Charlotte's clear eyes. "I was born a

gentleman. That was extremely lucky; I should have greatly disliked to have been born a chimney

sweep, for example. But that same honor to which I was born means that I cannot refuse Lucien's

request simply because of fear. Even given that I hate the thought

of leaving you and Pippa. Nor

can I turn down Lord Breksby's gently worded command to pick up a package, whatever it is, in

Paris. They need someone they can trust.

They can trust me, because I was bred to a position that made me trustworthy."

Charlotte wanted to shake him. What a silly, stupid reason to risk one's life. Yet she could see

from Alex's beloved face that he believed every silly word. Frustrated tears rose to her eyes.

"Lucien's youngest sister is only thirteen years old," Alex said. "I can't leave her there, Charlotte.

It was a terribly dangerous act for this milliner to have taken her in. Apparently he told everyone

that she was his niece, but there's a good deal of money offered for aristocrats, no matter how

young."

Charlotte buried her head in his chest, her shoulders shaking with sobs. "Why can't someone else

go?" she finally wailed, the ageless cry of wives and mothers watching beloved ones go fight in

foreign wars.

"Because I look so very un-English," Alex said wryly. "And thanks to Maria I also speak

idiomatic Italian. Darling, I will be perfectly safe, I promise you. I will be back in England before

you even finish your portrait of that rawboned kitchen maid."

"Then why so soon?" Charlotte pulled away, walking to the window and staring out at the dark

gardens. She felt utterly disconsolate.

Alex came up behind her and pulled the thick curtains shut. "There's no time to be lost."

Charlotte knew what he meant. The thirteen-year-old . . . He

wrapped his arms around her from

the back, and Charlotte leaned against him. Her hands absently twisted a length of the rich velvet

curtain.

"I don't see why Lord Breksby needs you to go to Paris. Surely Paris is the most dangerous place

of all!" "Actually not, darling," Alex said, his deep voice unruffled. "Italians go in and out of

Paris all the time, and it isn't as if I am being asked to bring back a person from Paris. I am going

to pick up a small package. It should take a matter of hours, and my carriage can be searched on

the way out without any risk. The French government is allowing business transactions to

continue, you know."

"Well, I still don't see why Lucien can't simply hire someone," she retorted. "You just said

yourself that rescuing people is dangerous."

"If you were trapped in France, darling, I would ask my closest friend. If Patrick were not in

England, I would ask Lucien. I would never just hire someone I didn't know. Lucien lost both his

brothers to the guillotine, so he has to ask me. But even so, he didn't ask me face-to-face. He left

me a way out by asking me on paper. But it wouldn't be right, Charlotte. I couldn't live with

myself afterward. What if we heard in a month or two that the girl had been imprisoned? Until

now Lucien didn't even know she had survived at all."

There was a little silence. Then Charlotte resignedly turned about and reached out her hand to

ring for Maria. It was time for bed.

Alex had to leave at five in the morning, and that was a mere

three hours away.

She looked up at her husband. He was looking at her with an imploring hunger that made her

heart turn over. Well, so what? She had broken every other rule that governed a lady's marital

relations. Odd that while she blithely broke the most sacred rules regulating the conduct of a

lady, Alex was risking his life to keep to the rules of being a gentleman, Charlotte thought wryly.

But her flux seemed to be unusually light anyway, so there would be nothing embarrassing about

it.

And she wanted to, she realized. She wanted to as much as he did.

"Will you act as my maid, my lord?" she asked, dropping her hand from the bell cord.

Alex took her delicate face in his large hands, kissing her sweet mouth. "I don't deserve you," he

said. "I don't deserve you, Charlotte."

Charlotte's arms slipped slowly from his shoulders, down his back and rested on his buttocks.

Alex's body went absolutely rigid. His wife was slowly learning to be bold, but she was only just

learning how much her touch inflamed him. Charlotte splayed her fingers and pulled her

husband's large, powerful body against hers.

"Just in case you don't come back," she whispered aching, "I am going to memorize your body

tonight."

His hands shaking with a potent combination of lust and tenderness, Alex turned Charlotte

around and started unbuttoning her gown. Pearls, yanked from their moorings, hurdled across the

floor with the sound of scampering mouse feet. As Alex unbuttoned, he kissed, and as he kissed,

he moved lower and lower until he was on his knees. He turned his wife around again and simply

pulled her gown forward and down until it draped low on her creamy stomach. Then Alex

wrapped his arms around Charlotte, resting his face against her soft skin.

"I thought you were pregnant," he said. "When I get back, I am going to make love to you every

night and every afternoon until your waist grows so large that I can't get my arms all the way

around you."

Charlotte chuckled. "That won't ever happen," she said. "My mama told me that people didn't

realize she was pregnant at all until practically the last month. We're so much taller than the

average woman."

She stared down at her husband's curls. Did he want an heir, or their child? "Do you . . . would

you like to have a child, even if it were another girl?" she finally asked, tentatively.

Alex rocked back on his heels, his hands stroking Charlotte's slim sides. "I would love to have a

little girl who looked just like you," he said, so sincerely that Charlotte knew he meant it. He

looked up and caught her eye. "I want to be there for the birth, you know."

Charlotte's eyes widened.

"You couldn't possibly" she gasped.

"You watch," Alex said, grinning. "I saw a baby born in Italy, when I was traveling around the

countryside and a woman simply gave birth right in the taverna.

It was wonderful. Even dragoon

guards couldn't keep me out of the room if you were having a baby!" Charlotte didn't know what

to say to that. She swallowed. If her mama ever found out, she would faint on the spot.

Alex ran his hands over Charlotte's flat stomach. Then he felt a surge of strong, masculine

annoyance. By God, he was starting to get maudlin! He had to watch it, or he would start

thinking he was in love with Charlotte. And he had made up his mind that he simply wouldn't

allow any woman to have that much power over him, ever again. Not even his own Charlotte. No

woman, he reminded himself. Expertly he began giving Charlotte little licking, nipping bites,

working upward toward her breasts.

Charlotte giggled. With a mock growl, her husband lunged at one of her breasts, taking the nipple

in his mouth and rolling his teeth over it. Charlotte's giggle died in her throat, replaced by a

ragged moan. Alex scooped up his wife and laid her on the bed.

The next morning at five o'clock, Charlotte and a very cross Pippa waved good-bye to Alex from

the steps of Sheffield House.

Pippa hadn't wanted to wake up, but Charlotte was determined that she say good-bye properly.

Not like the last time, when Pippa simply woke up to find that her papa was gone. And

if - Charlotte only let herself think this in the far recesses of her mind - if Alex did not come

back, at least Charlotte could describe how he kissed and kissed Pippa's face, later, when Pippa

was old enough to understand.

The next day Charlotte told everyone the story that Alex had prepared - that he had to go to Italy

suddenly, to attend to some business. Only Sophie and her parents knew the truth.

"I told you," was Sophie's response. "Every man plays the fool at some time or other. Why didn't

Lucien simply hire one of the Bow Street Runners? I thought they were so good at dangerous

business."

For a second Charlotte's heart leaped. But no, it was too late. By now Lucien and Alex would be

at Southampton, boarding a ship bound for Italy. Lucien was traveling as Alex's personal servant:

These days there was nothing surprising about having a French manservant.

"No," she said. "I doubt Bow Street Runners speak Italian. Alex made it all sound so simple."

"Nothing is that simple," Sophie said flatly. "Particularly not when it comes to the French."

Charlotte tightened her grip around Pippa, who was peacefully sleeping in her lap. She hadn't let

her out of her sight all day. Then she sighed and looked up at Sophie.

"When this little bundle wakes up, would you like to go shopping? I can't possibly face my studio

today. Besides, I need to buy some larger clothes."

"Larger clothes?" Sophie asked. "Why on earth?" Then her eyes widened. "You're having a

baby!" She jumped up and gave Charlotte an impulsive hug. "When?" "I'm not sure," Charlotte

said with a small smile. "You see, I thought my monthly had started and that I wasn't pregnant,

but then it stopped. And my mama told me this morning that a little blood was quite common. So

I could be as far as three months along, I suppose." She looked down at her slim waist a little

dubiously. "I feel just the same."

Sophie smiled at her gaily. "Well, why shouldn't you? Did you tell Alex?" "No, because I didn't

know. I didn't understand what was happening, and so he thinks I am definitely not pregnant, and

here I am, three months pregnant. When he gets back, I'll probably look like a cow."

"A very beloved cow," Sophie said with an affectionate grin. "Alex will be ecstatic. One evening

he and I were sitting next to each other - was it a musicale? I'm not sure where you were - and

he told me that he wanted a large family, four or five children."

"Really?" Charlotte asked, fascinated.

"Oh, yes," Sophie said. "He's besotted. Only besotted men want children."

Charlotte blushed and just stopped herself from asking if Sophie really thought Alex was

besotted. She had to keep a little bit of dignity. Pippa stretched and yawned; Sophie rang the bell.

"Do you want to take Pippa with us?" she asked.

"Yes."

Sophie gave her friend an understanding smile. Pippa looked so much like Alex.

"You'd better change your dress first," Sophie observed. "There's a big wet spot where Pippa was

sleeping."

Chapter 7

That night Charlotte circled the bed that she and Alex usually shared, staring at the

slightly crumpled, fine linen sheets. The night seemed to stretch endlessly before her; night after

night alone. Six weeks, Alex had said. Or two months at the most. Two months! Charlotte

wanted to scream at the unfairness of it. By the time he got back she would look like a pumpkin,

and he wouldn't want to make love to her. One tear slid coldly down her nose. But Charlotte

stopped herself. She couldn't spend the next two months weeping. She would have to organize

such a busy life that she fell into bed exhausted every night, so tired that she couldn't dwell on

her memories.

Finally Charlotte crept under the cool sheets. She was wearing one of her long white nightgowns,

the kind that Alex hated. Thinking about nightgowns made her remember Alex's impatient hands

running up her body, pulling her nightclothes out of the way with a muffled oath. Charlotte

smiled a little. Bed with Alex had become the focus of her days. He could be frowning at the

morning papers, totally absorbed in the report of activities in the House of Lords, and she would

suddenly remember the dusky intensity that overtook his eyes as he watched her undress at night.

Or Alex would come back from fencing, his hair ruffled, body glowing with exercise, and

Charlotte would remember how his chest heaved, after . . . He used to roll over with a moan of

simulated exhaustion and growl that he would never recover.

Charlotte bit back more tears. Two

months wasn't very long. She would finish the portrait of Mall.

The portrait was causing her some trouble. She had chosen Mall because of the angularity of her

face, but she was having a good deal of difficulty capturing Mall's rough, lively person. One day

her face looked like a cartoon of a Welsh country girl, all nose and chin. The next day, Charlotte

would work hard on bringing back Mall's contrary girlishness and shrewdness, and then the

portrait would take on the air of a little girl trapped in a grown-up face. Thinking about the

painting made Charlotte feel much calmer. After all, there's more to life than Alex and this bed,

Charlotte told herself with a twinge of amusement. Someday they would be old and gray, and

they would be tired of making love.

Suddenly there was a squabbling noise at her door and Charlotte sat up.

"Who's there?" she called.

"Oh, my lady, I am so sorry," came an anguished voice from the door.

Charlotte lit the candle by her bed. The door opened and she dimly saw Pippa's nanny, swathed in

a large robe, clutching a kicking, squealing Pippa.

"She ran out of the room before I realized she was awake," Katy continued. "I'm so sorry she

awakened you, my lady." Pippa let out a furious wail.

"Pippa," Charlotte said. "What on earth are you doing awake in the middle of the night?" And

then, "It's all right, Katy. Let her go."

Pippa trotted over to the bed, her little bare feet patting on the wood floor.

"Papa?" she asked, her voice quavering. "Where's Papa?" "Oh, sweetheart," Charlotte said, her

heart turning over. "Papa had to go away for a while, but he will come back."

Pippa gave her a look of total disbelief and sat right down on the floor. She began to cry, not the

angry sobs of an almost two year old, but the heartbroken sobs of a baby deserted again.

Damn! Charlotte thought furiously. How can he leave her? She hopped out of bed, shivering as

her bare feet came down on the drafty floor. Katy was standing quietly in the door.

"She's been asking all evening, my lady," Katy said, in response to her unspoken question. "I've

told her that her father is coming back, but she doesn't believe me."

Charlotte knelt down and pulled Pippa onto her knees.

"He is coming back, poppet," she whispered into Pippa's soft curls. "You remember when we

went to Scotland together, and Papa was there waiting for us?" Charlotte stood up, still cuddling

Pippa, and turned back to the bed.

"Katy, I will keep Pippa here tonight," she said with sudden determination. Katy curtsied and

closed the door silently.

Charlotte climbed back into the bed, tucking a sobbing Pippa up against her left side.

"Pippa," she whispered. "Shall I tell you a story?" Pippa didn't say anything. But Charlotte

remembered loving the stories her nanny told her when she was young. So she started a story

about a mama hen and her three naughty little baby chicks. After a bit Pippa stopped crying and

turned her face up toward Charlotte's. Then, when Charlotte was chirping the peep peep of the

three naughty chicks as they left their house to look for trouble, she felt Pippa's body relax and

her head grew heavy against Charlotte's arm.

Charlotte lay for a moment in the warm darkness. Suddenly the bed didn't seem so large and

unfriendly anymore. Pippa was curled on one side of her, and in her womb Alex's baby was

growing larger every moment. Charlotte smiled. Soon she would have two little chicks.

The next morning Charlotte started all over on Mall's portrait, to the kitchen maid's mingled

distress and pleasure. Mall loved sitting in the mistress's airy studio; she vastly appreciated the

time to rest her feet. But she was eager to see a picture of herself too. Even staring into the

cracked mirror upstairs hadn't told her why the mistress wanted to paint her. Mall was hoping

that she would be transformed into a great beauty, on canvas at least.

By two weeks later, Charlotte had made more progress on the portrait than ever before. She had

also dragged Sophie to two balls, two musicales, and the opera.

"I abhor musicales," Sophie complained, waving her fan gently. "We are not dressed to our best

advantage. I don't appreciate myself in chaste white muslin. Just look about you: Every woman

looks like a little white ghost. We appear sheeplike, and that inspires men to become dull

admirers of themselves and make their court to nothing but their cravats. Look at that fop who

calls himself my cousin." She waved at the Honorable Francois de Valcon, her mama's nephew,

with an enchanting smile. Then she turned back to Charlotte. "He is more concerned at the

disordering of his cravat than I would be at having my skirt fly above my ankles."

"That is because you admire your own ankles as much as Francois likes his skill at tying cravats,"

Charlotte whispered back.

Sophie laughed. "Musicales are particularly boring because we just sit about and listen to

singing. I like to dance. There's always the chance I'll be able to admire my ankles, or at the least,

I can provide the occasion for someone else to admire 'em. Look at this room. There's not a man

here who isn't a skirter, paying his lazy addresses to us, but actually conducting business only

with his mistresses."

"You shouldn't use that kind of slang, Sophie!" Charlotte protested. But as she glanced around

the room, she had to agree with Sophie. Musicales were for the bored and the foppish; Mrs.

Felvitson's Russian singers were unintelligible and monotonous. The room was full of young

matrons like herself, accepting the languid compliments of fairly uninterested fops.

"And all these old women: They are hoping for a scandal to erupt," Sophie continued disgustedly.

"We should leave, Charlotte.

They're such dowdies, just longing to kick up some dust. If a libertine walked in the door and

happened to look at a woman, they would build some sort of a tale out of it."

"Let's go then," Charlotte replied, standing up. But as she stood, her eyes caught sight of a tall

man just bowing his welcome to Mrs. Felvitson.

"Alex!" she cried. She took one step, but the combination of shock and the fact she had just

jumped to her feet blurred her eyes.

Without a word, and for the first time in her life, Charlotte fainted clear away. Luckily Sophie

had just risen to her feet, and when Charlotte suddenly swayed, she automatically reached out her

arms. A minute later she found herself sitting on the floor, Charlotte's head and shoulders in her

lap, completely bewildered. Then Sophie looked up, and at the same moment Charlotte opened

her eyes.

The man smiling down at the two beautiful women saw a puzzled expression on their faces that

he had seen a thousand times before. Patrick squatted down on his ankles, patting his new

sister-in-law's hand.

"How do you feel?" "Are you Alex?" Charlotte whispered. Sophie didn't say anything. To her

mind, this man - obviously Alex's twin - only looked like the earl from a distance.

But Charlotte was still half in a swoon, her mind foggy. She reached out and touched Patrick's

cheek wonderingly. "You aren't a ghost, are you?" Patrick's eyebrow shot up. Was his brother's

wife touched in the upper works? Sophie shot him an admonishing look.

"Will you please help the countess off the floor?" she said, with something less than full social

politeness. "This is your sister-in-law, as I'm sure you have realized."

Surprised, Patrick looked at the little termagant who was

clutching his brother's wife. Then he

smiled back at Charlotte, dismissing Sophie from his mind.

"I am your brother-in-law, you know," he said winsomely. "Not Alex at all."

"I apologize," Charlotte said more firmly. "I can't imagine what came over me. But I would like

to get up now." She was uneasily aware that there was a cluster of people hovering around them.

She quickly sat up, and then put her hand to her head. Lord, her head was swimming! In a second

Patrick scooped her off the ground and stood up with Charlotte in his arms. She struggled,

feeling with real distress the sharp eyes of all the gossips standing around them.

"This isn't proper," she whispered. "Put me down, please."

Patrick strode over to the nearest divan and deposited her with aplomb. Then he stepped back

and gave a flourishing bow. "I am Patrick Fakes, my lady, and very pleased to make your

acquaintance," he said. "I just stepped off the ship this morning. When I came by to see Alex I

was told of your existence, and of the fact that you were at this lovely musicale." He smiled at

Mrs.

Felvitson's sharp little face, hovering at his elbow.

"Oh, dear," Charlotte said lamely. "Alex did send you a letter telling you of our wedding, in the

diplomatic pouch."

"Must have been already traveling when it arrived," Patrick said. "Would you like me to

accompany you to the house? There seem to be a plaguey amount of people watching us here."

"Yes." Charlotte stood up, composed again. She made a graceful

apology to Mrs. Felvitson for

interrupting the music (even those Russians had been craning at her lying on the ground!) and left

the room on Patrick's arm, Sophie trailing after them.

They left behind them a far more excited crowd than had originally graced Mrs. Felvitson's

soiree.

"There's nothing to it," Sir Benjamin Tribble said in an extremely unconvincing manner.

"No, indeed!" Sylvester Bredbeck agreed, his sharp eyes scanning Sir Benjamin's melon-colored

jacket in an unpleasant fashion.

"The countess was surprised to unexpectedly meet a man who looked exactly like her husband,

that's all!" Everyone had to acknowledge the value of this statement, and the whole subject may

have fallen into silence, except for two factors. One was Lady Presdefield's excellent memory,

and the second was Lady Cucklesham's acute irritability.

"I dare swear you are right, Sylvester," Lady Prestlefield said in her customary brisk manner.

"Except that those two dear children do know each other. Alex - that is, the earl - told me

himself that the countess, such a lovely girl she is, met his brother years ago, before he went off

to the East. He said it to me flat out. In fact, he said that when he, Alex, met Charlotte at my ball,

she first mistook him for his younger brother."

"You are too severe, Sarah," Lady Cucklesham cooed. She preferred to maintain a sweet tone at

all times. "Why, if one were to believe that they knew each other already, some inconsiderate

soul might think the worst of that tender gesture she gave him,

brushing his cheek with her

fingers as she did."

"Nonsense," Sylvester said stoutly. "That's a pack of nonsense, Sarah, and you ought not to repeat

it. Charlotte had never met Patrick Fakes before in her life."

"Yes, yes, you are right, Lord Bredbeck," Lady Cucklesham said.

"Now, Sarah, darling, you must

not repeat a word about the fact that Charlotte was so well acquainted with the earl's younger

brother before he went abroad, because I dare swear the truth of the matter is that they merely

met once or danced ... or something of that sort."

Sylvester Bredbeck cast Lady Cucklesham a glance of acute dislike. He always thought she was a

puffed-up turnip, and now that she had finagled her way into a marriage with a man forty years

older than herself, it certainly hadn't done her temper any good.

Sylvester bowed rigidly and left the musicale. It wouldn't make any difference if he were to

defend Charlotte any further; better to let it blow over, he thought.

But London society was rather thin since the season was drawing to a close. There wasn't much

to talk about. The matches that would happen this season had already been made, the documents

signed, the couples happily or unhappily embarked on forty years of matrimony. Some two

weeks ago there had been an elopement, but it was very unsatisfactorily concluded, to everyone's

mind - the young bride banished to the country and the groom sent off to the continent.

So by the next evening every member of the ton who had enough self-respect to keep abreast of

current gossip knew that the Countess of Sheffield and Downes, who had only been alone for a

few weeks, had greeted her husband's brother in the most tender and affecting manner, actually

fainting from happiness at the sight of him. And although no one could actually remember seeing

them dance together during Charlotte's first season, quite a mythology sprang up overnight about

what must have been a brief but passionate romance before Patrick was ordered off to the Orient.

Chapter "Only the most unkind," Lady Skiffing observed, "would think that Charlotte had

married the elder in place of the younger. If only on a practical level, no girl would marry a

second son when the first was asking for her hand."

Her little circle considered this a very fair observation. "You have so much good nature, my

dear," Lady Prestlefield said comfortably.

"Yes, indeed," chimed in Sir Benjamin Tribble. "Why, those who don't have your forbearance,

Lady Skiffing, might be persuaded to wonder about dear Alex's previous marital problems. . . ."

"That's just an example of the ill nature some people exhibit," Lady Skiffing exclaimed. "It is

such a consolation to me to think that none of us would repeat anything so indelicate about the

earl!" The little circle thought with satisfaction of the kindly news they had spread far and wide.

In fact, Sir Tribble had gained quite a bit of fame this week due to having been actually present

when the lovers met again. Tribble had a way with words, and his account of the countess's

white, imploring face and the way she pressed her trembling fingers to Patrick's face was taken to

be a most affecting account.

So, no matter how many times her mama protested that there was no truth to the report, and her

friend Sophie York ("a bit wild herself," those same unkind people might say) staidly insisted

that Charlotte had merely mistaken Patrick for her husband, by the end of the week all of London

understood that Patrick had broken Charlotte's heart by going off to the Orient without marrying

her, and that she had only married Alex as second choice.

Charlotte didn't know what to do. She was, quite simply, bewildered by the storm of scandal that

had broken over her head without warning.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," her mama said consolingly. She had come to say good-bye.

The season was over, and rather than retire to the country the duke and duchess were taking a

long-promised trip to America to visit their eldest daughter, Winifred, who had married a

wealthy American.

"I hate to leave you at such a delicate time," Adelaide said, "but the fact is, darling, that one

simply cannot get through one's life these days without at least one major scandal erupting out of

nowhere. When I think of the things that were said about your father, for example, when we

were young! Someone told me, quite seriously, that Marcel was on the verge of leaving me and

running off to France with a young opera singer. And when I finally got up the courage to

mention it to your father, he had no idea who this woman was! All he could say was 'France?'

France? Deuced uncomfortable country!" "The part that really bothers me is leaving you while

you are enceinte" Adelaide said. "Pregnancy is such a tiresome business. Still, the baby is a

perfect excuse for you to stay in the house, dearest, and rest. For goodness sake, don't give

anyone fodder for gossip. I'm afraid you will just have to wait and become acquainted with Lord

Fakes after your husband returns."

Charlotte listened silently as this flurry of advice descended on her. "But Mama, Lord Fakes

sent me a note saying he would wait on me this afternoon at four o'clock. I can't send him a note

telling him nay. It would be so impolite."

Adelaide had the perfect solution. "Simply tell him to send away his carriage, darling. His

servants can take the horses around the park and no one will be the wiser. But you mustn't spend

any time with him in public. That would be fatal."

Charlotte looked at her mama's serious expression and promised to avoid Patrick at all costs.

"Now we will just pray that some poor foolish soul decides to elope with her footman," her

mama said bracingly. "Because this kind of story - especially when there is nothing to keep the

fire burning - always disappears within a matter of weeks. Why, in a year or so you can dance

twice with Patrick and no one will even notice." Then she hesitated. "Darling, was Patrick the

man in the garden?" "Oh, Mama, of course not!" Charlotte was disgusted. No one believed her,

not her mother or her husband. "It was Alex, as I told you."

Adelaide was without measure relieved. She had manfully hidden

her worry from Charlotte,

believing that anxiety was bad for pregnancy. But it made her feel ill to see just how close this

whole scandal came to the truth. That was the worst of it. She was glad to be leaving for America

because she was not the best of liars and she was always afraid that people could guess when she

told half-truths.

Finally Charlotte dutifully kissed her mama good-bye. Adelaide departed with a muddled lecture

about pregnancy, birth, midwives, doctors and wet nurses. Charlotte listened numbly. She still

couldn't believe she was pregnant. There had been no sign, unless one included her fainting spell.

She began to think that fainting must be a sign of pregnancy, because every time she rose too

quickly she felt as if the room were spinning. But she didn't want to see a doctor yet. Charlotte

shuddered. She was perfectly healthy; she must simply remember to stay seated or risk making a

fool of herself.

So that afternoon Charlotte smiled engagingly at her husband's brother and waved him to a chair

without getting up.

"You see," she confided, "I, or rather Alex and I, are having a baby, and it seems to make me

rather light-headed."

Patrick's eyes cleared. He was relieved to hear that his brother hadn't married a vaporish woman

whose sensibilities were so fragile that she fainted constantly. Although he wouldn't have blamed

him, Patrick thought. Lord, but Alex had found a dark beauty.

"Alex will be pleased." Patrick grinned. "He always wanted a

large family. I used to twit him

about it because it didn't seem to fit with his . . ." Patrick trailed off. He had forgotten that one

didn't make jokes about one's brother's propensity for wild starts in front of his new bride. Let

alone acknowledge that Alex once thought family life was pretty flat.

But Charlotte only heard confirmation of the fact that Alex wanted children. "Yes, it is splendid,

isn't it? He doesn't know yet."

"I won't tell him. What the devil is he doing over in Italy?" Patrick asked.

Charlotte swallowed. Alex said not to tell anyone, but surely he didn't mean his own brother? But

Patrick continued without pause. "I know: winding up the affairs of that virago he married," he

said. He changed the subject politely, and they talked of his travels for a few minutes, but the

atmosphere was strained.

Finally Patrick took the bull by the horns. "I suppose you know about the stories that are

circulating about us."

"Oh, no!" Charlotte cried, looking up suddenly. "I forgot to ask you to send away your horses!"

"Do you really think that's necessary?" Patrick said, his brow darting up in a gesture of

aristocratic disbelief that was so like Alex that Charlotte couldn't help smiling.

"My mother thought it would be a good idea."

"In that case I'll send them off directly."

Charlotte rang the doorbell but no butler appeared, only a rather flustered looking upper

housemaid.

"Don't you have a butler?" Patrick enquired.

"I dismissed him, and the new one hasn't arrived from Scotland yet. Molly, will you ask a

footman to attend us, please?" "Yes, my lady." Molly dropped a curtsy. Then she hesitated.

"Molly?" "Oh, my lady, there's such an awful man outside! He says he's from The Tatler, and we can't get rid of him."

"My goodness," Charlotte said, startled. "Who exactly has tried to evict the man?" "Well, there's

three footmen have been out to see him, but no one can stop him from lurking about the house

and sneaking up to the windows."

Patrick rose threateningly to his feet. "I'll - " "No, you certainly won't!" Charlotte snapped. "You

can't be seen here at all. I suppose your coach is waiting for you in front?" "I don't know," Patrick

replied. "I had a fresh team this afternoon, so Derby may have taken them for a spin."

"Molly, send a footman out to intercept Lord Foakes's carriage and send it off to Hyde Park."

"No, no," said Patrick, his deep voice amused. "He can tell Derby to go home and I'll take a

hackney later."

Molly curtsied and left the room. There was a moment of silence. Then Patrick laughed ruefully.

"Do you know, I have never had an affair with a married woman? I begin to see that it must be

remarkably uncomfortable."

Charlotte chuckled. Now that she saw Patrick more clearly, she couldn't believe she ever thought

he was Alex. They were entirely different. Patrick looked as if he was always about to burst out

laughing or say something whimsical. Whereas Alex . . . Charlotte thought longingly of Alex and

the way he would grimace when she teased him for wearing his "brooding look."

"London is dashed dull after India, anyway," Patrick said frankly. "I thought I might go into

Leicestershire for the hunt. I shall be off in the morning, and that ought to kill the gossip." He

looked disgusted. "All this devilish propriety! I never could abide it. Although I must say I have

never got up to as freakish an exploit as Alex did in Italy, and he always seems the sober one.

Annuling his marriage!" Patrick had caught up on all the family gossip the night before, and he

was feeling rather refreshed at the thought of his somber twin getting himself into such a

bumble-bath.

Charlotte blushed faintly. She felt a bit diffident about the subject of Alex's first wife.

"Anyway, how the deuce am I to get out of here?" Patrick demanded. "I'm very pleased to have

met you, but unless I'm to spend the night I need to find a back door, or some such."

Charlotte had been thinking this over. "The problem is that you're so very tall," she said,

dismissing her idea of disguising her brother-in-law in a maid's dress. She had read a novel in

which that worked, but somehow it didn't seem very likely in reality.

"I'll just wait until the cove outside lopes off."

"The cove outside lopes - off?" Charlotte repeated in a bewildered tone.

Patrick gave her an irrepressible grin. "I'll attend your ladyship until that gentleman who is

creeping about your house gives up and goes to find his dinner."

"Oh. Is that Indian slang?" "No! It's flash talk, from the streets behind your house," Patrick said

with asperity. He had forgotten how sheltered English women were. The well-bred ones, at least.

"Oh," Charlotte repeated. There was a knock and Molly entered again. Charlotte looked up

thankfully. Patrick made her feel muddle-headed and tired. It must be the baby, she thought.

"This arrived for you, my lady." Molly held out a somewhat worn envelope. "I thought, under the

circumstances, that you would like to see it directly."

"Thank you, Molly," Charlotte said, taking the envelope. She knew instantly it was a letter from

Alex. It was quite brief.

Dearest Charlotte, it read. dislike writing letters, so this will be quite short. I'm afraid we have

run into more problems than we anticipated. While Lucien's business is completed, I have yet to

acquire the merchandise I told you of, as it was not available in Paris. It will take a while to

arrange the transfer, but then I shall be coming home.

At the bottom, written in a less formal, sprawling hand, Alex had written Beloved. And then,

Alex. Charlotte stared at the letter in disbelief. This was it? An obscurely phrased note about

merchandise from Paris? He must have been afraid that the letter would be intercepted, she

thought. Well - but "beloved"? That must mean her. She felt a warm glow creeping over her.

This was even better than Alex saying that he loved being married to her. "Beloved" is close to "I

love you," she thought. Then she realized the room had been

silent for several long moments. She

looked up and blushed.

"Do forgive me, Lord Fakes. It is a letter from your brother. He reports that he won't be able to

return from Italy as early as he planned. In fact," she frowned, "he doesn't exactly say when he

thinks to return!" "Kicking up a lark!" Alex's brother said knowledgeably. Then he caught

Charlotte's eye and almost blushed himself. "No, no," he said. "I didn't mean that. I'm sure Alex

will be on the first boat back to England."

Charlotte's heart felt very light. "You think he's gone on the mop?" she asked cheerfully. "Or

piked the bean?" "One 'pikes on the bean,' " Patrick corrected, a large grin splitting his face. He

had suddenly discovered that his new sister-in-law was not only lovely, but enchanting as well.

"And, no, my elder brother has definitely not run off. Alex was always the more responsible of

the two of us. But where in the world did a well brought-up young lady learn those terms?"

"From our third housemaid, whose name is Mall," Charlotte replied.

"Mall . . . Mall is a good friend of yours?" "Oh, yes. We have spent quite a lot of time together.

Mall is from the Welsh border." Charlotte smiled at her perplexed brother-in-law. Served him

right for treating her as if she were a silly nincompoop.

"Well," Patrick said finally, when it became clear that she was not going to explain any further,

"why don't I look out the servants' entrance, and if I don't see anyone I'll lope off and if I'm lucky

no one will smoke me!" Charlotte laughed. "I shall have to ask

Mall for an appropriate retort to

that proposal." She got up cautiously and held out her hand.

Her eyes danced; Patrick was surprised to feel a twinge of jealousy of Alex. What on earth for?

He didn't intend to get married, even to a lovely girl like this one.

"Here's my fumble," he said jokingly, taking Charlotte's delicate hand in his. He stooped and

kissed her cheek. "I am very glad you have joined the family," Patrick said in an entirely different

tone. "Alex deserves the best, and I think he might have found it."

Charlotte smiled into Patrick's dark eyes, eyes so alike Alex's and yet so different. It was odd that

she could find one face soul-shatteringly beautiful, and the other - practically identical to

Alex's - just a nice, handsome face.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "I hope when all this fuss has died down we can come to know

each other better."

"As do I, my lady." Patrick bowed formally, and left the room. When he didn't return in five

minutes, Charlotte assumed he had found the coast clear. It was time to think about moving the

household to the country. She had been waiting for Alex, hoping not to have to supervise such a

large, complicated endeavor by herself, especially without a butler. But what could she do?

Clearly Alex didn't have any idea when he would be returning to England. And now that winter

was drawing in, coal smoke was starting to darken the streets. She remembered the article she

had discussed with Alex long ago, about the black little lungs of autopsied babies, and

shuddered. They would wait one more month for Alex to return, and then she and Pippa must

leave London.

Meanwhile Mr. Peter Taffata, better known as Taffy Tatler (one of The Tatleis best rattlers, as

they were called) waited patiently outside Sheffield House. He knew that the Earl of Sheffield

and Downes had a younger brother named Patrick, and he knew that this Patrick was inside the

house, doubtless being entertained by the young countess. Taffy had no personal animosity

against either of these two people. As a matter of fact, he had a good deal of sympathy for the

countess. It was a crime that her parents had married her off to an impotent man. Still, her

shenanigans with her husband's brother looked as if they might warm up to a really good story,

perhaps even a whole page to himself.

He'd been puzzling over one question for the last hour or so, rather like a bullterrier with a cow

bone. That's why I'm so good, Taffy thought absently, because I keep at a problem when I find

one. And the problem here was: Why hasn't a fancy butler come out of the house and told me off

soundly? Usually Taffy had to deal with butlers who were more puffed up than their masters,

their noses so far in the air they couldn't smell their own toes. But this house didn't seem to have

a butler. In Taffy's experience, that meant that the butler had either scampered - or got himself

fired. And Taffy liked the latter idea better. Because, he thought, who ever left the employ of an

earl? The three footmen who had tried, very inefficiently, to get him to move his stumps had

looked well-fed enough, and they were dressed in spry uniforms.

So it was just a question of catching one of the kitchen maids and getting her to cough up the

name of the ex-butler, and then he, Taffy, could get a real story.

Taffy looked at the unwelcoming eyes of Sheffield House. He had a strong sense that the

footmen had tattled on him, and that Lord Foakes had snuck out the back of the house. Of course,

he could report that Foakes never left, but stayed the night. . . . He chewed this over for a while,

but finally dismissed it. Too risky. What if Foakes had gone off to his club? Bound to have: In

six years of chasing gossip Taffy had noticed that gentlemen headed back to their clubs like flies

to a horse.

He needed to find that ex-butler. Taffy headed around the back of Sheffield House with renewed

energy. One hour later he was possessed of a trembling, weeping kitchen maid who kept

protesting how she shouldn't 'av, even as she had clutched ten shillings in her hand. And from

the kitchen maid had come a name, Staple, and his favorite pub, The Raven.

Taffy knew The Raven well; it was a rather less than reputable place, on a dingy street called

Ram Alley. Not the kind of place your better butlers would frequent, that was for certain, sure,

Taffy thought. Why most of these buders were stuffier than their masters; you never caught them

taking a pint of th'best in the local, with a baker on one side and a wagoner on the other. No sir,

butlers gathered in flash pubs and traded discreet gossip amongst themselves. He felt a glimmer

of hope about Staple. This was likely to be a man influenced by a bit o'th'ready, in Taffy's

opinion. Fired by the mistress herself, the kitchen maid had said, delight stiffening her tone. Fired

for not behaving like a gent, it sounded like.

Better and better, Taffy thought. Buders what as thought themselves one step under God himself

were likely to get their noses out of joint when they were told they weren't acting like gentlemen.

Taffy cast one more look at Sheffield House. Lord Foakes must be gone by now. Taffy set off for

The Raven.

Chapter Two weeks later Taffy achieved what he felt sure was the apex of his career. He unfurled

his morning Tatler and looked at it lovingly. He had the whole gossip section to himself, just as

they had promised him. He checked his own name first. There it was: Mr. Peter Taffata. He

sighed in satisfaction. Last time they had spelled his last name with one F and it gave him

indigestion for days. "Butler Tells All," he read. "Honeymoon Crisis; Wedding Trip Canceled,

the Countess's Tears." Lovely. Really Lovely. And then his favorite headline: "All's Well That

Ends Well: the Countess and the Twin." Taffy really liked the literary touch - using the title of a

Shakespeare play. He thought it gave the article a touch of class that The Tattler didn't usually

get. His thoughts wandered to a dream of writing for the Times.

Charlotte took one look at the paper that Molly silently brought to the breakfast table, and almost

gagged. Her wedding night was down in black and white where everyone could see it. A wave of

humiliation flooded over her. She couldn't even read the whole page; she pushed back her chair

and ran upstairs, tears prickling her eyes.

At the top of the landing, Charlotte stopped. Where was she going? She turned into her room,

picturing the eager faces of ladies reading the gossip column and shuddered. I have to leave

immediately, she thought frantically. What if someone calls around to sympathize? Or to ask

questions? Charlotte clenched her teeth together, hard, and ordered herself fiercely not to cry. She

had to leave now, within the hour.

The only refuge was outside London. She would go to Alex's country estate. If only Alex were

here! Alex would find their ex-butler Staple and put him in jail. Despite herself, tears filled

Charlotte's eyes. She didn't want to arrive at Downes Manor by herself, a countess without a

husband.

She fought to control her raging emotions until finally the look in her eyes turned from anguished

mortification to determination.

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte battered back the hysterical wish to throw herself onto her bed

and cry. Instead she rang the bell, summoned Marie, and calmly told her that the entire

household must be ready to leave in one hour.

She had last seen Pippa two hours ago, 3, when Pippa toddled into her room for their early

morning hot chocolate. They had snuggled together in the bed, Charlotte tickling Pippa's round

tummy. Charlotte walked quickly down the hallway to the nursery, and told Katy their change

in plans. Pippa was sitting on the ground, clanking spoons together in a businesslike way. She

looked up, sensing a new tone in Charlotte's face.

"Mamaaa!" Pippa said gaily.

"Of course, my lady," Katy replied. Katy never seemed to be ruffled by anything, not even

when Pippa had upended a chamber pot on the kitchen cat.

Charlotte smiled at Pippa and then knelt down beside her as Pippa held out her arms. Somehow

with Pippa's tight grip around her neck, the scandal didn't seem so insurmountable. Who

cared what the ton thought of her? After this scandal, Alex would probably banish her to

Scotland anyway . . . but she would have Pippa. And her baby.

Charlotte's new, gently rounded

tummy was evidence that Alex's child was nestled under her heart.

In her rush Charlotte completely forgot that Chloe van Stork had been asked for tea that

afternoon. But her oversight was just as well. Because Mr. van Stork read Taffy's entire

article, thoroughly, and then laid down his paper and announced that Chloe was not going to

Sheffield House for tea, not now and not ever. His daughter's protests left him unmoved. He

wasn't going to risk Chloe's engagement to Baron Holland - and that's just what might happen if

she were associated with someone like the Countess of Sheffield and Downes.

"Not that I blame her, you understand," Mr. van Stork explained ponderously. "Though why all

the tears on her wedding night? I can only assume that her parents explained nothing to her!"

"Explained what" Chloe cried in frustration.

Mr. van Stork looked at her in exasperation. "Lord Fakes is not wholly a man," he said and then

closed his mouth firmly. Chloe knew that was all he was going to say on the matter. She turned

to her mother, who was slowly digesting the article.

"It is the fault of her parents," Mrs. van Stork exclaimed. "All this fuss is clearly the result of the

girl not being informed. I never understood their decision, never," she said. "Why marry your

daughter when there will be no grandson?" "The sentiment," Mr. van Stork replied. "You send

her a note, miss," he said to Chloe. "You'll have to cry off; you can use any excuse you want."

"Poor girl," Mrs. van Stork said with a sigh. "It's not the only excuse she'll get in the next few days."

Chloe was tremendously relieved when the footman returned with her note still in hand, saying

that Sheffield House was closed up and only a skeleton staff left in residence. Perhaps Charlotte

didn't even know about this terrible article. Chloe had finally managed to finagle the paper from

her mama, who felt that she shouldn't read those kind of details. But Katryn van Stork had

reminded herself that Chloe was a grown-up now, engaged to be married, and it might not be bad

to read about wedding nights. After all, if Baron Holland kept his word, Chloe herself would be

married by next year. So Chloe read, horrified.

Yet to her mind the article didn't make much sense. Her beloved Charlotte had an argument

with her new husband; that was clear. Someone had thrown a jar of cream against the wall. The

family had abruptly changed their plans, not gone to Italy, and Alex had made Charlotte ride in

the servants' carriage.

"Why?" she asked her mama. But Mrs. van Stork didn't know.

"I can only suppose that the poor girl was not told," Mrs. van Stork said heavily, "that the earl

cannot have any children."

"But they are so happy together!" Chloe objected. "You have not seen them together since they

were married, Mama. She loves him."

"I assume the countess came to terms with her husband's disability - as is appropriate," her

mother said. "But her behavior now is most improper. She should

not be associating herself with

the earl's brother. The author of this article says that she entertained Lord Fakes in her house. If

she were a true lady, she would not welcome a man into the house when her husband is not in the

country. And it doesn't matter if the man is her brother-in-law," Mrs. van Stork said, in answer to

Chloe's unspoken challenge. "She is in a most delicate position, given her husband's incapability.

Her behavior must be above reproach."

"It's not fair," Chloe protested. "I'm sure Charlotte has done nothing untoward with her husband's

brother. She is not that sort of person!" Mrs. van Stork looked at her. "You will have nothing to

do with Lady Sheffield from now on, Chloe. Your reputation is most fragile.

When you marry the baron, everyone will be watching to see whether your 'city' birth comes out,

and you show yourself to be less than a gentlewoman. Lady Sheffield may well be innocent, but

she is ruined now. If you are not careful, the same injustice could happen to you."

Chloe nodded. But silently she decided that after she married Will she would not repudiate

Charlotte. Her mother was wrong. Chloe had made plenty of friends among the aristocratic girls

she went to school with, and Charlotte was different from most of them. You could read her heart

in her eyes, Chloe thought, with an unfamiliar touch of poetry. The sight of Charlotte and Alex's

first waltz together as a newly married couple had emblazoned itself on her mind. Charlotte

loved Alex. She would never, never betray him, even if she did discover that they could have no

children. Of that Chloe was sure.

Mercifully, Charlotte herself found so many aspects of her husband's country estate needing

attention that she had little time to think about wedding nights, brothers-in-law, or ruined

reputations. Alex's father had spent almost no time at his county seat, Downes Manor: The

curtains were moth-eaten and in some rooms wallpaper was actually peeling from the walls.

Charlotte hired an army of local women and had all sixty-five rooms cleaned from top to bottom.

She spent hours with Percy Rowland, a representative of one of London's best fabric houses.

True, Percy eyed the notorious countess curiously on his first visit to the estate, but after the first

few minutes Charlotte's meticulous eye for color absorbed all his attention.

With Percy's help, she refinished three sitting rooms, the grand dining room, and the ladies'

parlor. Items of furniture were hauled off to be re-covered, only to return a few weeks later

swathed in dull gold or plummy crimson. Charlotte's stomach grew large and her back twinged

protestingly every time she rose from a chair; she turned her attention to the nursery. The nursery

became a charming fairy castle, its walls covered with fanciful murals - but Charlotte was

starting to view the stairs up to that nursery with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. She had a water

closet installed on the first floor of the house and began thinking about the moldering, dark

master bedchamber. And by the time Alex's bedchamber had been transformed into an elegant,

airy set of chambers, papered in a Florentine design, Charlotte

was heartily tired of both Percy

and pregnancy.

The weather grew warmer, and she and Pippa spent the afternoons wandering about the grounds

of Downes Manor. Charlotte was slowly introducing new ideas about gardening to the ancient,

clutch-mouthed gardener who ran the outdoor staff. After much coaxing he put up an airy lattice

frame south of the house and began to train roses to grow over it. Charlotte hung the inside with

light pink cotton and she, Pippa, and Katy would escape the afternoon sun by sitting in rosy

shade. After a while she asked the footmen to bring them tea there, and one day the three of them

even stayed through a brief shower. Pippa shrieked and shrieked with delight as water pummeled

the light roof, making a sound like hundreds of grenadiers beating drums.

Charlotte was trying to paint a landscape for the first time: the gentle slope of the hill down from

the summer house to the river at the base of the garden. But it wasn't terribly satisfying. She

missed the struggle and frustration of drawing faces, trying to catch a kernel of emotion that was

present one minute and lost the next.

The portrait of Mall was finished. In the end, Charlotte set her in a little courtyard, outside.

Somehow what finally came through in the picture was not the young, strong, funny Mall that

she wanted to catch, but the bone-weary, exhausted Mall at the end of a hard day. The Mall who

had polished too much silver and carried too much hot water. Charlotte showed it to her

tentatively, afraid that she would think it ugly. But Mall burst into tears. She stood in front of the

picture, choked with sobs.

"But, Mall ..." Charlotte wasn't sure what to say.

"It's her" Mall gulped. "It's me mum."

Charlotte looked back at the portrait. She looked through Mall's eyes - and there was a tired,

rather fierce, angular Welshwoman staring back at her. Mall had stopped sobbing and was just

staring at the picture.

"She died after me brother John was born. It was just too many: eight children, just too many. I

couldn't do anything. She never even got to see John. . . ."

"Take it. Take it home to John."

"Oh my lady, I couldn't!" "Yes, you can. I am giving it to you. And I am going to send you to

Wales, Mall. Did I tell you that I own a house there? Well, I'd like you to go with Keating and

see what shape my house is in," Charlotte said steadily. There was an acid tightness at the back of

her throat. She knew what it was: just a little fear. Women died in childbirth all the time. That

didn't mean she would.

"Me?" Mall stared at her with wide eyes.

"Yes."

"But I'm just the third housemaid, my lady."

"Well, now you're going to learn to be a housekeeper, Mall. And I want you to stop off at your

father's house and spend a good week with your family before you begin your new position."

Charlotte dispatched Keating and Mall to Wales with directions to open the house and to make

extensive lists of those things needed to refurbish it. The roses crept over the top of the lattice

house. Pippa learned to say whole sentences, made up of three words. She developed a passionate

love for the kitchen cat, who rapidly became adroit at recognizing her small footsteps and

disappearing.

Still there was no news from Alex. Charlotte allowed herself to think about him only in small

snatches - first thing in the morning or last thing at night. She shied away from imagining his

rage when he saw The Tatler and found out that the horrible Staple had not only detailed the ugly

shambles that was their wedding night, but had invented quite a few things himself, such as the

fact that one of the maids supposedly heard her crying out "Alack! I shall have no children!"

Charlotte still shuddered every time she thought of The Tatler.

When Sophie arrived for a visit, she was impudently cheerful about the scandal. She didn't tell

Charlotte that her mother had forbidden her to visit and that Sophie had wrangled with her for a

full week until Eloise finally gave her permission. In fact, the marchioness had relented only

when Sophie threatened to create a scandal the next season that would cast Charlotte's little

problems into the shade. Even so Sophie had to be fairly graphic about exactly what she

would be caught doing before her mother finally quailed and allowed her to visit Charlotte.

"Alack!" Sophie said blithely, when she and Charlotte were sitting in the newly refurbished Green

Room after dinner. "Alack! I shall have no children! I fear me that Braddon has given up the

chase."

Charlotte glared at her. "Don't be funning about this, Sophie! Alex is going to be furious when he returns. If he returns."

Sophie rolled her eyes. "The most besotted man in all of London - and you're afraid he won't

return? What do you think he's doing?" "I don't know," Charlotte admitted. "He said he would be

gone for two months, and he has been gone well over twice that. And he has only sent one letter.

Here I am, eight months pregnant" - she gestured faintly toward her growing stomach - "and he

doesn't even know we're having a child yet. Oh, Sophie," Charlotte said wrenchingly, "do you

think he went into France and didn't come back out?" "No. Because in that case the Foreign

Office would inform you. Have you tried writing to the rascal who sent him off on this

excursion?" Sophie shared Charlotte's sense that the whole idea of picking up a

"package" in Paris was ridiculous.

"Yes. Lord Breksby sent a note aa note about two weeks ago saying that I should not worry, and

the project was taking longer than planned. His tone was not - entirely nice. The

worst of it was that I had the distinct impression that he felt the mess here less here was

so awful that Alex was making the project take longer than it need Ht need have."

"I doubt that," Sophie replied, "replied. "For one thing, how would Alex know about it?" "I don't

know, I don't know. But I keep thinking that even though they didn't tell me exactly

where he is, probably those men in the Foreign Office know his location. And

what would stop one of them from sending over a copy of that terrible Tatler article?"

There was a moment of silence.

"That would be difficult," Sophie agreed. "Do you know where Alex's brother has gone?"

"No. He said he was going hunting in Leicestershire," Charlotte said. "But what good could he do

even if he were here? I don't want to see him again! The Tatler made it sound as sound as if he

may have stayed in our house all night - when he was only there an there an hour at the most!

Oh, dear ..." Tears fell down her face.

Charlotte had spent so much time keeping up a serene front that it was a great relief to

see Sophie. For example, she was acutely aware that none of the neighbors had called as

would be normal. They must think that I am a scarlet woman, she thought miserably. She

instinctively placed her hands on her growing tummy.

Sophie interposed. "You're probably right; Lord Foakes would just make things worse."

She decided to change the subject. "I must say, you don't show the baby very much,"

Sophie said. "Are you sure that you are eight months along?"

"I saw a doctor, and he seemed seemed to think so. My mother said her pregnancies didn't show

much until until the very end."

Thank God, Sophie thought, Maman has no idea about Charlotte's pregnancy. That would be the

straw te straw that broke the camel's back. Sophie could just imagine the scandal that Charlotte's

rounded belly was going to provoke.

"Perhaps you should write a letter informing Alex of the pregnancy, and send it to him care of the

Foreign Office," Sophie suggested.

"I thought of that," Charlotte answered. "But what if Alex isn't planning to come back at all? He

told me once that he was on the point of leaving his first wife for good when she proposed the

annulment. He was going to join the army, or something of that nature. I'm afraid that someone

told him how shocking I am, and he has simply decided to stay in Italy."

She was sobbing hard now, her face buried in a sofa cushion. Sophie moved over and stroked

Charlotte's shaking shoulders. She wasn't sure what to say.

"I'm afraid that he doesn't love me enough, Sophie. He doesn't trust me, and now he never will,"

Charlotte said chokingly. "And I love him so much! I don't think that I can live without him."

"Hush," Sophie said, "hush. You don't have to live without him. I think you are exaggerating the

importance of Alex's absence. I expect he is sitting in an Italian taverna at this very moment,

having the time of his life, and hasn't heard a thing about the Tatler article."

"But how can he have such a good time?" Charlotte sobbed. "I miss him so much; I dream about

him every night. It hurts."

"Men are different," Sophie retorted. "You can see that easily enough, Charlotte. Women may

love one man, but men simply love the person they see before them. That old chestnut, absence

makes the heart grow fonder, doesn't work for men. They are like

children with toys: They move

onto the next shiny object if you take the old one out of their hands."

Charlotte pulled herself upright. "You're so bitter, Sophie," she said. "Why are you so bitter?"

"My father," Sophie replied succinctly.

"Oh," Charlotte said unhappily. Everything in her resisted the idea that Alex, her dear beloved

Alex, was like Sophie's father, the Marquis of Brandenburg. But if Alex wasn't akin to the

marquis, where was he? Four, no five, months had passed, and while she counted each day off as

if it were a year, Alex was apparently frolicking about Italy, perhaps not even thinking about the

wife he had left at home.

When Charlotte tried to imagine how he was feeling about her, all she could think of was his

black rage in Bournemouth, when he thought she'd betrayed him. She pushed the terrifying image

from her mind. He promised, he promised to trust her. She simply had to hope that he would

keep

that promise. But her mind circled endlessly, moving unhappily from the facts of Alex's first

marriage, which made him so apt not to trust her, to their blissfully happy time together. Surely

that would count with him, more than any silly article published in his absence! "He said he

loved being married to me," she told Sophie, her voice shaky. "And he said he wanted to have

children. I'm sure he'll be happy when . . ." Her voice trailed off.

In Sophie's warm hug she read disbelief; in the recesses of her heart the same disbelief hovered.

If Alex loved her, truly loved her, he would have found a way to come home by now. She drew a

deep breath and hoisted herself from the couch.

"Prospective mothers need to sleep." Sophie held out her hand, her blue eyes loving, coaxing,

sympathetic.

Charlotte smiled, a little, peaked smile. "Do you think . . . could you stay with me for another

month, Sophie?" "Well," Sophie said teasingly, tucking her arm through Charlotte's elbow and

drawing her toward the door, "it will be a great sacrifice, of course. Braddon undoubtedly plans

to propose at least three or four times during the coming month, and woe is me if he turns his

attentions to another. My mother, for one would be furious - " she chattered on. But when they

were climbing the stairs, Sophie said casually that it would be a sound test of Braddon's

affections if he didn't see her for at least two months. And Charlotte's heart lifted, warmth

creeping into the empty space left by her tears.

Chapter

In fact, Alex knew nothing of the Tatler article. At the very moment when Charlotte was sobbing over his absence, he was involved in an animated argument over the relative merits of a certain year of vin santo, a strong Italian wine. Yet even as he agreed with the owner of a little bar that this particular vin santo was very strong but not too strong, and disagreed with him over the merits of adding a touch of pepper, he was thinking of Charlotte. When Signor Tonarelli finally stopped talking and bustled into the room behind his counter to fetch the famous "package," Alex found himself thinking not about the extended chase which this package had led him over the last five months, but of his wife's lovely, slim legs. He fancied they were particularly beautiful above the knees.

When she lay on her side, he would run his hand slowly, slowly up the perfect slow curve, over the little bump of her hip, his thumb falling inside and teasing the delicate hollow that lay just over her hip bone.

Alex stared absently at the wooden shelves that lined the back of Bar Luce, the only restaurant, so to speak, for miles. He had found his way up to this little Italian village only after months of enquiry. Slowly he had traveled through the countryside and finally up the mountain, tracing the path of a weary old Frenchman. Where the man had been going before he died in this little village, Alex had no idea. Signor Tonarelli claimed to have never seen him before.

Mario Tonarelli came back out of his inner room, clutching a small, grungy bundle.

"Graie! Gra-ie milk," Alex said enthusiastically.

"Prego," Signor Tonarelli responded. He was delighted to have been of service to this rich and

powerful stranger. The man was from Rome, Signor Tonarelli had decided, given his accent. But

he was much friendlier than the average Roman - a nasty, suspicious lot, as all mountain folk

knew. What on earth the Roman was doing in his small osteria, picking up a bundle of old

clothes, he didn't know. Tonarelli knew they were just old clothes, because of course he and his

wife had taken a careful look when the old Frenchman died, practically on their front door. He

said - the Frenchman did - that someone would be along to pick up the package, and he was

right. But neither Mario nor his wife, Luce, could figure out why on earth anyone would ever

want to recover the old Frenchman's clothes.

They buried him in the cemetery at the back of the little village, but Mario hung on to the

package. Sure enough, along came a Roman only six months later, asking for it.

Mario's eyes lit up. The Roman seemed to be counting out a little pile of gold lire. Who cares

why he wanted those musty old rags? "Gravel" Tonarelli said, with true gratitude in his voice. He

stood for a second in the door of his osteria, watching the Roman return to his carriage. He was a

good-looking man, the Roman. Tall, with an arrogant, powerful walk that Mario much admired.

He himself had grown rotund from eating too much of Luce's mushroom pasta; but even so, he

had never walked as this man naturally did.

Like a wolf, Mario thought. His hand closed firmly on the pile of coins.

"Luce," he bellowed, as Alex's carriage began its long, winding way down the mountain. Mario's

sudden shout frightened the chickens who were pecking about the piazza, the square in the center

of the village that was ringed by three stone houses, his bar, and the church.

"Is he gone?" His wife appeared breathlessly around the side of a building. She had been doing

their washing in the stone bath behind the fountain, and her dress was splashed with water.

In answer Mario simply held out his hand, showing the coins.

"Graie a Dio!" Luce said simply. Mario smiled and walked over to her, a little of the stranger's

arrogant lope in his stride. "I shall take some flowers to the grave today, to the old man," Luce

added.

Mario nodded. He deserved flowers, that Frenchman. He had made them rich by dying on their

doorstep. Now they could not only buy a cow, but perhaps even spend some money to buy

another mule. Their mule, Lia, was sixteen years old, and she staggered as she climbed up the

mountain every couple of weeks, dragging a cart full of things to sell in the bar.

In the carriage Alex looked broodingly at the package he held. He hated the cursed thing by now.

He had arrived in Paris only to find the house that he was looking for had been torched by the

police a few weeks before. Rather than show any undue interest, he had been forced to leave

Paris immediately and hire a dingy French spy to go back and find out what had happened and

where the inhabitants had gone. That took a blasted two months, over two months.

And all Alex himself could do was go through the motions of being an Italian merchant

interested in exporting French wines. He was careful, however, not to enter France again until the

day he casually crossed the border, drove his horse straight to a certain milliner's house, and left

three minutes later with a very frightened French girl, Lucien's sister Brigitte. The recovery of

Brigitte was as smooth as cream. They weren't even stopped at the border into Italy, just waved

through by a couple of bored soldiers.

Hearing the story of how the mob came to Lucien's house, how his wife and son died, and how

Brigitte escaped capture only by hiding in a pile of laundry made Alex itch to go home. Of

course, Pippa and Charlotte were happy and healthy in England. Yet something about Lucien's

still white face and the way he clutched his little sister to his chest made Alex feel precariously

mortal.

He found himself thinking about Charlotte all the time: not even imagining sex as much as

Charlotte's laughing face in the morning when Pippa clambered into the bed and spilled

chocolate on the sheets. The way she would bite her lower lip as she concentrated on painting.

The fierce manner with which she would counter his arguments when they disagreed over

decisions made in Parliament. The consummate pride he felt as he gave a speech in the House of

Lords that was not exactly as it would have been had he not discussed it with his wife the night

before. Discussed it, ha! Battled over it was more accurate.

I love her, Alex realized one morning. Blast it, I'm in love with her. After that it was as if the icy

wall that he had built around his heart during the marriage to Maria simply tumbled to the

ground. Alex feverishly longed to hold Charlotte in his arms, to kiss her all over until she was

crying out with desire and need, and then whisper "I love you" in her ear. She'll cry, he thought,

picturing her huge dark eyes filling with loving tears. She would see that he forgave her for

everything before their marriage, that he really trusted her. He even forgave her for not being a

virgin when they married. He was prepared to forget that she had slept with his brother before

him. Alex was so impatient to board the boat back to England that he could hardly sit still.

He toured vineyards in Italy and established what would later prove to be a lucrative chain of

vineyards prepared to import wine into England from Italy, rather than into Italy from France, as

he pretended. The activity served his cover, so to speak. But even as he conducted the leisurely

conversations that precede every Italian business transaction, Alex was aflame, burning to return

to England.

Yet as he lay in his stiflingly hot bedroom, arms crossed behind his head, Alex sometimes felt

disgusted at his own eagerness.

Hadn't he already played the fool, thinking that a woman would be honest? He felt a deep, brutal

shame, remembering the shambles of his marriage to Maria, her promises to be faithful to his

bed. Shades of his old cynical self haunted the edges of his soul, cautioning that even Charlotte

was no virgin when he married her. Maybe she was just another Maria, out for what sex and

money she could take. The gaping, raw anger he felt when he walked in on Maria with the

footman still echoed at the back of his mind.

But for the most part Alex nourished his dream of a grateful, loving Charlotte. Charlotte was no

Maria. She loved him. Alex thought about how her body fitted to his like a glove during the

night. If he drew away she would sigh and move restlessly until she snuggled up against him.

How had she slept without him? It had been almost five months; she must be used to sleeping

alone, he thought rather sadly.

All those weeks of waiting had culminated in a bundle of old clothing. Alex stared, stupefied, at

the bundle he had just opened. His carriage jolted uncertainly over the stony track down the

mountain, taking him to the sea. One part of his mind rejoiced at being finally on his way. But

another part felt a mounting rage.

How in the hell could that unmitigated fool Breksby send him all the way to Italy to serve as a

secondhand clothing merchant? He picked up the pieces of clothing distastefully. They were

shabby, black, the clothes of a poor Parisian merchant. There was a pair of old trousers, ripped in

the upper thigh, a coarse shirt that was probably white at some point in its distant past, a heavy,

unwieldy jacket. Distastefully he felt through the pockets of the jacket and trousers, but there

were no letters, no money, nothing. But then Alex's eyes narrowed. The fat innkeeper had said

that the old Frenchman had told him someone would pick up the clothing. There must be

something valuable here.

In a few minutes, he had it. Or them, rather. They had been folded many times, worked into tiny

squares and placed inside the lower seam of the jacket. They were letters, and Alex had no idea

how in the world they ended up sewn into a shabby black jacket.

Because they were love letters, in French, and by the end of the second sheet Alex had a very

good idea who had written them.

They were letters from Napoleon to Josephine. And they were written before the couple were

married. As a matter of fact, they were clearly written while Josephine was still married to

General de Beauharnais.

Alex whistled a bit, reading the third letter. Then he grinned. He had heard that Josephine was

beautiful . . . but beauty didn't seem to be her only desirable attribute. By the time he had finished

reading the letters, Alex's face was somber. He could make a good guess about what the English

government intended to do with these letters. The French still had many aristocrats locked up in

their dungeons, and he held the ransom for at least a few of those unfortunate people in his

hands. Alex folded the letters carefully, putting them in his breast pocket.

Suddenly the five months he had been stuck in Italy seemed inconsequential. He had a beloved,

beautiful wife waiting for him in England. Lucien's wife and his young son would never return.

The letters had appeared too late to save them. But it might ransom a different family out of

Bonaparte's prisons. Alex shouted up at his driver with new purpose. These letters needed to be

back in England, even more than he himself needed to be there.

Five months after he had left England, Alex stood on board ship, smiling into a cold, dank wind

blowing off the English coastline.

There is nothing as bone-shakingly chilly as a rainy coastal breeze, and yet there is nothing that

smells so heart warmingly English either, he thought. Slowly the rain-stained cluster of pubs that

marked the London wharf came into view as their boat meandered up the Thames. Lighted

windows winked and disappeared through the sheets of rain that were dashing to the shore.

Lucien appeared at his side, tightly bundled against the storm.

Alex cast an affectionate arm around his shoulders. "We made it!" he shouted against the strained

creaking of the small ship as it jarringly came into port. Instantly stevedores began trotting up

and down the gangplank, carrying boxes of wine out to the dock.

"Gently!" Alex shouted, his voice booming over the noise of slanting, falling rain. One of the

seamen looked up, startled, but the stevedores paid no attention, nimbly finding their way over

the piles of cargo, winches, ropes, and garbage that festooned the dock.

"They pay you no mind," Lucien chuckled. "They know their work."

"I'm not worried they will drop a box," Alex said. "But if they shake the port, it will have to settle

for two years . . . and I could use a drink at this moment."

Lucien turned and gathered his sister, Brigitte, into his arms. "Didn't I tell you to wait for me in

the cabin?" he scolded. Alex could just see glowing, bright strands of hair peeking out from

beneath Brigitte's hood. He had become very fond of Lucien's courageous little sister over the

past few weeks on board the ship. She was finally losing her white strained look and beginning to

take on the normal air of a mischievous thirteen-year-old.

"I wanted to see England," she said in her marked French accent. "It is my new home, no?" Alex

put his arm lightly around her shoulder and they stood together, the three of them, watching the

last of the cargo being taken off the ship. Alex knew to the bottom of his soul that he would

never be more proud of anything he did in his life than he was of his trip into France. The fact

that this effervescent, lovely girl was alive was due in part to him; from what Brigitte had told

them, the milliner was being asked more and more questions about his supposed "niece." It was

only a matter of time before Brigitte would have been brought into the police for questioning.

Alex gestured toward the shore. "Your new home lies before you. Shall we disembark?" "Daphne

will be waiting for us," Lucien said to his sister.

"Do you think Daphne stayed in London after the season ended?" Alex asked curiously. "Won't

she have retired to the country?" "Oh, no," Lucien said with calm, absolute certainty. "She would

never leave London under the circumstances."

Alex's heart gave an odd lurch. He had never even considered the possibility that Charlotte might

still be in Sheffield House. But what if she was? What if she too waited for him, not wanting to

miss a moment of time with him? On shore, he saw Lucien and Brigitte off into a carriage and

then hailed a hansom cab himself. Even as they rounded the corner into Albemarle Square he saw

that the house was closed, the shutters down, and the knocker off the door. Charlotte must have

taken Pippa to the country. Well, what else could she do? She had no idea when he would return.

He had only been able to send his wife one cryptic note during the five months. Still, he supposed

Lord Breksby had been in touch with her. First thing tomorrow he would deliver the Napoleon

letters to Breksby and by the day after that he could be crushing his wife into the bed. Alex

smiled to himself wickedly.

If there seemed to be an air of strain among the few servants left in Sheffield House, Alex didn't

notice. Keating, his man, had accompanied Charlotte out to the country, and it would never occur

to Alex to give a thought to the odd way the two remaining footmen eyed him. He didn't bother

going to his club. Instead he had a long bath and fell into bed, grateful to be on solid ground

again. There was really no point in going to White's, Alex thought drowsily. All his friends

would be out of London. Parliament was closed; the season was finished; even the law courts

weren't in session. Only civil servants like Breksby would remain in London's sooty streets.

But in fact Lord Breksby had also gone to the country. "He has retired to his estate," Alex was;

informed. And so it was that one of Lord Breksby's underlings, one; Ewart Hastings, had the

pleasure of informing the Earl of Sheffield and Downes what a shocking scandal his wife had

created in the last five months. The newest tale was that she was pregnant, presumably with his

own brother's child. Alex listened to Hastings's tale with an absolutely unmoving face. Inside

Hastings shivered and thought he'd never seen a more devilish look, but he didn't stop talking.

The allure (of telling such an arrogant member of the Quality that his wife had been acting like a

tramp was just too strong. As a junior in civil service, Hastings had put up with endless

condescension; he relished every minute of this set-down. So he told it all: Charlotte's faint when

she first encountered Patrick; the Tatler article; the fact that Charlotte entertained Patrick in

Sheffield House; her subsequent pregnancy.

"About four or five months along," Hastings said cheerfully, adding, "I'm very sad to say, your

lordship." It had suddenly occurred to him that he himself was in a precarious position. A nerve

was pulsing in Alex's jaw, and his eyes were glowing with rage. Hastings's mouth shut, and then

opened only to say, weakly, "I'm sure there's no basis in fact for this report, my lord." Alex just

looked at him. Then he reached across Hastings's oak desk and ruthlessly grabbed his carefully

arranged cravat, jerking him to within an inch of Alex's furious glare.

"I should hate to hear that you ever repeated any of this foul, slanderous information," Alex told

him through clenched teeth.

"I will not," Hastings managed to squeak. He could feel sweat pouring down his back. Alex

disdainfully pushed him back. Hastings took in a shaky breath. Alex turned on his heel and left

without a word.

The minute the door shut, Hastings sat down in his chair. He was trembling like an

autumn leaf in a high breeze, he realized. Insane - that's what Alexander Fakes was. A lunatic.

He, Hastings, had only told Fakes what any man on the street could tell him. Just what did

Fakes intend to do? Threaten half the population of London? Hastings carefully cracked the

knuckles on his left hand. It calmed him, and his heart began to slow down. Really, what a

madman, he thought with a touch of conceit. He started on the knuckles of his right hand. Finally

a little smirk touched Hastings's mouth. His high and mighty lordship could abuse as many civil

servants as he wished; it wouldn't change the fact that his new wife was a trollop who was

sleeping with his own brother. Hastings's smile widened. He leaned back in his chair and began

to hum a little tune.

Hastings disliked his own wife - a penny-pinching, quarrelsome woman, he thought - but he

could say without the slightest hesitation that she would never sleep with anyone but him.

Indeed, she hated the whole performance, as she'd often told him. But if a man's wife is not his

own, well, that man is poorer than the poorest chimney sweep. That's a fact, Hastings thought.

And if that fact made the high and mighty earl a bit touchy, Hastings could understand and

sympathize.

Alex stalked out to his carriage, absolutely calm. He gave the coachman the address for his

solicitor, and sat back in the carriage.

Thankfully, he felt nothing. A reasonable voice in his head reminded him that such a scandal was

only to be expected, and he agreed. Still, he felt as if someone had poured cold steel through his

veins. He didn't even feel bitter, he thought, a little surprised.

He must have known, all along. If anything ... he felt a little pain that Patrick would do this to

him. Patrick was his other arm, his boyhood companion, his twin. How could he betray him? Yet

even this, the grossest of the betrayals facing Alex, didn't really bother him.

On the other hand, Mr. Jennings of Jennings and Condell found

himself bothered indeed.

Normally nothing flustered Jennings. No matter what disaster - forged wills, foolish lawsuits,

illegal duels - was recounted to him, Jennings maintained a tranquil front. In fact, to his mind the

law had the remedy for anything. But surveying the huge, dispassionate earl standing before him,

Jennings felt an unfamiliar tremor of panic. If only his father were still alive; his father was so

good at handling irate peers and irascible earls. He could talk them out of their bluster and fury in

about twenty minutes, blending his soothing voice with large draughts of the very best port. But

every instinct cautioned against offering this particular earl a glass of port. He looked murderous,

in Jennings's opinion.

Jennings bowed very low. "My lord," he said calmly, "won't you enter my study?" Once Fakes

was settled in his comfortable, book-lined study, Jennings took out a folder. Inside was a copy of

the Tatler article in question. Jennings sat down in a large leather armchair opposite Alex. He

crossed his legs and made a tent out of his delicate fingers.

"I called on your lady the morning after this article appeared," he said, watching Alex scowl as he

read the details of his wedding night in The Tatler. "However, I just missed her. Her entourage

left for the country that morning. I cannot say I disagree with her decision," he said in his thin,

rather acid fashion. "It would have been remarkably unpleasant had she remained in London. The

article, naturally, caused a good deal of excitement."

He paused. Alex sat back, absolutely composed, tapping his

fingers on the arm of his chair. Since

he said nothing, Jennings continued.

"I took the liberty of hiring an investigator after the article appeared." He drew another sheet of

paper out of the folder on his knee.

"I have found that instigating a suit for slander can be remarkably efficacious in quelling a

scandal brew of this type. However, detailed information is needed before such a course can be

contemplated." This was Jennings's way of saying that there wasn't any point in suing for slander

if the Tatter's charges were factually true. "This sheet specifies the activities of your brother, Lord

Fakes, during the week in which he was in London. You will see that he made no effort to

contact your wife until he arrived at your house and was informed of your marriage. To my mind,

this casts a good deal of doubt on the supposition that the romance was of long standing."

He paused again. Alex didn't say a word, but his teeth involuntarily ground together. Of long

standing! Damn right it was, given that it included the taking of Charlotte's virginity.

Jennings continued. "Your brother accompanied the countess back to Sheffield House from Mrs.

Felvitson's musicale, but he left immediately. He then returned two days later at four o'clock, by

appointment. He exited the house at approximately five thirty, by the back entrance. He left by

the servants' entrance because he was aware of the presence of a reporter in the front. Lord

Fakes spent the rest of the evening in White's, where he lost over two hundred pounds at play.

The next morning he rose early and left for Leicestershire in company with Brad-don Chatwin,

the Earl of Slaslow." Alex looked up. Barring himself, Braddon had been Patrick's closest friend

in school.

"Hunting?" "That would be my surmise. After that point, of course," Jennings added primly, "I

saw no reason to continue investigating the activities of your wife and Lord Fakes.

Consequently I can cast no light on the reports of her pregnancy." He regarded his tented fingers.

"Of course, if the child is born in the near future, there would be no reason for anxiety." Jennings

took a deep breath. What he had to say next was not pleasant. "There is nothing that can be done,

legally speaking, about the rumors circulating about your wife. Her future reputation hinges on

two things: the birth date of this child, and your attitude."

Jennings looked up, meeting Alex's steady eyes. "I am sure I need not tell you how quickly your

actions will prove or disprove these rumors in the eyes of the world, my lord."

Alex nodded. Then he tapped the newspaper on his knee. "And this?" Mr. Jennings slipped

another piece of paper out of his folder. "The Tatler was served papers for slander six days after

the report was published. They were, of course, expecting this response on our part and had

thought to shield their report by labeling your wife 'the Countess' and your brother 'the Twin.'

However, my brief noted that there is in fact only one countess, your wife, who stands in any

familial relation to a male twin and therefore they infringed upon the law, which is quite strict

with regard to personal slander. After consulting with his solicitors, who naturally concurred with

my brief, Mr. Hopkins, the editor, approached me with a quite handsome proposition. They

published a full retraction." Jennings handed Alex another sheet of paper.

"However, this retraction has no real effect, given that the season was over," Jennings pointed

out. "I put this to Mr. Hopkins with some force. I also ventured to name a sum in pounds that I

was confident the court would assign to us, should this lawsuit continue. Mr. Hopkins therefore

has agreed to publish a further article about 'the Countess' and 'the Twin,' in the spring when the

season begins again. This article will carry no reference to the lawsuit, and will appear to be

simply a further piece of news.

However, it will retract all the innuendo that was suggested by the earlier article. The article will

be read and approved by yourself and your ladyship before publication. I judged, under these

circumstances, that it was better to overlook the report of your wedding night." Jennings tactfully

refrained from mentioning that according to his investigations the article was dead right about

that night.

"All this will depend," Jennings said heavily, "on the birth date of your child, unfortunately."

Silence fell in the room. Jennings stared assiduously at the glowing colors of the Oriental rug that

adorned his study.

Finally Alex spoke. "Prepare a bill for divorce," he said abruptly. Jennings nodded. Delicacy

forbade him from mentioning that the already prepared document reposed in the same folder

poised on his knee. Alex rose. "I will contact you about whether you should proceed with the

divorce."

Jennings bowed, and Alex left the study. He needed to think about all this in peace and quiet.

Clearly nothing had happened in London between his wife and Patrick. The fact that Charlotte

had fainted when she saw Patrick brought the first twinge of pain that he had felt so far. Of

course, she must love him. Women never forgot the man who took their virginity. A deep ache

moved through Alex's heart and was ruthlessly banished.

The babe was obviously the key. If it was his child, Charlotte would now be unwieldy, large, on

the verge of giving birth. But it was unlikely, he thought, remembering that he had left in the

midst of Charlotte's monthly bleeding. She wasn't pregnant when he left, so whose baby did she

carry at this moment? He was perfectly conscious that Jennings had talked of "the child"; there

was no doubt that Charlotte was carrying someone's baby, then. It must be Patrick's.

Abruptly Alex realized that he had mindlessly walked down the

street, away from Jennings's

office in the Inns of Court. He cast a look over his shoulder. His groom was following him down

the street, walking the horses. The horses were fresh; he might as well head out to Downes

Manor. He had horses housed on the Oxford Road, and he could ride alongside the carriage. The

last thing he needed after weeks in a ship was to be confined in a small, swaying carriage for two

days. Alex raised his hand, summoning the groom and carriage, and barked a few commands.

One of the footmen hopped nimbly off the back and disappeared down the street. He would

gather Alex's clothes and send them after him to Downes Manor.

I forgot to mention the presents, Alex thought, staring absently after the footman. He had

lovingly chosen presents for Charlotte and Pippa over the last months, picking up a piece of

glowing blue silk here, a carved wooden toy there. Somehow they had mounted into stacks,

evidence of the irresistible presence of his wife and child in his mind over the last five months.

Just as well, Alex thought matter-of-factly. He had made enough of an ass of himself, even

allowing himself to think about Charlotte while he was away. She clearly didn't give him another

thought after he boarded the ship. He felt a twinge of regret at the idea of Pippa's presents. Still,

he could use them to make her feel better when they returned to London without Charlotte.

Alex stared coldly ahead as he sat in the carriage, easily adapting to the swaying movement as the

horses trotted onto the high road leading to Oxfordshire. As the imperturbable Jennings had said,

it all depended on the birth date of the child. He would know as soon as he entered the room

where Charlotte was. If Charlotte was not very large with child, he saw no reason to discuss any

of this unpleasant business with her. Why bandy words? Alex's heart hardened into cold steel at

the image of his wife pleading with him, perhaps even promising - again - that she was

trustworthy.

The silence that settled in the carriage was ominously empty, devoid of kindness or warmth. Alex

had an acid taste in his mouth and a cruel pain flickering behind his eyes; he felt as if some

important part of himself had been discarded somewhere on the road, back in the dusty column

that rose behind the galloping hooves of his horses. He kept thinking: Stop! Put it back the way it

was . . .

someone, please, put it back the way it was before I went to the Foreign Office, before I went to

Italy, before I left Charlotte's side.

But no one offered to do that small service for him, and so Alexander Fakes drew further and

further ahead of that other Alex, back in the dust: the pre-Hastings Alex, the pre-Italy Alex, the

Alex who loved and was loved.

Chapter By the time that Alex's horse was galloping down the straight row of oak trees that lined

the road to Downes Manor, he had rebuilt, step by step, the icy wall which memories of Charlotte

had toppled in Italy. The last two nights he lay awake, great slashing blows of humiliation

shaking his body. Finally he had got to the point where his lips twisted in a wry smile. By God,

Patrick always said I had terrible taste in women, he thought.

The whole scandal seemed horribly appropriate, looking back over his thirty-plus years. He had

fallen in love for the first time to a prostitute-in-training, in a garden. And then he had tried to

recreate that experience in marriage. Finding a trollop among gently bred women didn't seem to

be so difficult. The problem was that his garden girl had gone on to her chosen career, and the

woman he married. . . .

Well, Charlotte's record spoke for itself. Alex's chest felt very tight. He was determined not to

lose his temper, as he had in the inn at Bournemouth. What was the point of shouting at someone

who was simply acting in the only way she knew? Alex caught himself up. He had to keep Maria

and Charlotte separate in his mind. After all, Patrick was the first man Charlotte loved. She gave

him her virginity. That was not the same as Maria, sleeping with any man with two legs and

equipment to match. If he walked into the room and found Charlotte on the point of giving birth

he would know it was his child. If she wasn't, well then the child was his brother's and, a bitter

voice in his head remarked, that baby will probably be your heir.

He was done with wives and

women, after this. He was giving up the idiotic dream of finding someone as wild and tender as

the garden girl. He'd find a woman when he needed one, and leave the titles and land to Patrick's

heir - even if that heir was Charlotte's child.

Alex had no idea just how much he was counting on finding a large, bulky Charlotte waiting for

him at Downes Manor until he was directed to the new summer house, behind the manor. And

there she was. He stood for quite a while, an eternity, it seemed.

Charlotte was sitting on the floor of the breezy terrazzo.

Pippa was sitting across from her, and they were playing with dolls. Charlotte's doll was talking,

and now Pippa's doll seemed to be clumsily dancing on the floor . . . but it was Charlotte's waist

that commanded Alex's eyes. She was clearly pregnant. Her beautiful figure had bloomed around

the waist; her breasts, softly caught up in a white muslin day dress, looked lush and generous,

blooming from her low-cut gown. And she was glowing, lovely, more beautiful than he

remembered. Soft curls fell down her neck, and from his angle long, inky eyelashes brushed her

cheeks. She was so lovely that he felt a twist of agony around his heart, as if someone had

twisted a key in his chest.

Just then Pippa's nanny looked up and saw her master standing just outside the summer house.

One glimpse of the earl's hard, hard eyes and Katy nearly panicked, something she never did.

Instead she acted instinctively to protect Pippa from whatever unpleasantness was about to

happen.

"My lady, Pippa and I will be in the schoolroom." Katy stooped and picked up Pippa, totally

ignoring the angry wail that accompanied her rapid decision. Pippa hated to be abruptly swooped

into the air. Her small doll fell from her hand and her wail turned to a howl.

Charlotte pushed dark curls out of her eyes and looked up, absolutely confused. Katy was already

walking briskly toward the main house, Pippa's voice growing smaller and smaller as Katy

walked. Then Charlotte knew. She turned her head to the left, and there he was, staring down at

her.

Her heart leaped with joy to see him. "Alex!" she cried, her face lighting up. He didn't move.

Charlotte smoothly rose from her place on the ground, adjusting her white high-waisted gown.

The French styles suited pregnant women terribly well; there was nothing like a waistline under

the breasts to diminish one's girth, Charlotte thought self-consciously. Alex was staring at her

middle.

Charlotte's eyes danced. Well, of course, he didn't know she was pregnant. "We're having a

baby," she said happily. He still didn't move or speak. Charlotte was beginning to feel

uncomfortable. She took a few tentative steps toward him and stopped.

"We're having a baby?" Alex finally said, his voice rasping. His eyebrow flew up, in the way she

loved, except that now he was looking at her with utter disdain. "Shouldn't you say, am having a

baby?" His voice settled to its normal deep tones; he was practically purring. "Or let's see, I think

I like this phrasing: The Countess and the Twin are having a baby. Congratulations, everyone!"

Charlotte's heart dropped to the bottom of her stomach. She literally couldn't find any words. She

had pictured Alex's rage over their butler's depiction of the wedding night. Of course, she knew

that he would be furious about the scurrilous innuendo about his brother and her. But she had

never thought he would actually believe the article. Because he promised to trust her . . . She

didn't say a word, just stared at him, eyes wide.

As for Alex - all his planned calmness and control flew out the window. His wife was so

beautiful, gazing at him in bewilderment, as if she had no idea what he was talking about! And

yet she was so clearly only a few months pregnant. Black, filthy rage slashed his heart.

"You're a whore," he said, almost casually. "It seems I have a remarkable affinity for women of

that stamp." His laugh was like nothing Charlotte had heard before. "Yes, indeed," Alex said

savagely. "You might say I specialize in whores. But this - this was something special! Why are

you looking so surprised? Did you think I would forget that you had your flux when I left?" He

stroked toward her, his large, lithe body as controlled as a pacing tiger. Charlotte opened her

mouth, but he took her chin in his strong hand, holding it brutally tight. "I don't think so, darling.

I don't want to hear any pleas, this time. The calendar is so deadly factual, isn't it? I don't think

even you can talk your way out of this one.

"I have figured out the rest of our married life. If Patrick wants you, he can have you. I've

instructed my solicitor to make up a bill of divorce. If Patrick doesn't - and I don't see why he

should, given that he's already had the goods - you can go and live in Scotland. If the baby is

born in the near future-, he or she will come with me to London. I'm not having my children,

either of my children if there are two, brought up by a tart."

Charlotte instinctively wrapped her arms around her stomach. He was mad, absolutely mad. She

pulled her chin away from his hand. Alex looked at her, a muscle jumping in his jaw. His eyes

were as black as pitch. Charlotte shook her head a little, to clear it.

Could this really be happening?? Was this the man she had waited for and dreamed so

passionately about? "You promised," she half whispered. "You promised." Her face was drawn

with pain, but she stood firm, pulling her slender shoulders back to look at his face with dignity.

She would not allow herself to curl into a hedgehog and scream aloud.

Alex's lip curled. "You promised. You promised to love and obey. With my body I thee worship"

he sneered. "I think they had better take that line out of the marriage service, don't you? It just

doesn't suit the times."

Charlotte stared at him numbly. He was so handsome, even with stark rage written on his face.

Part of her longed to throw herself against Alex's chest, to beg him to listen, to hug him and kiss

him. He was in pain: She could see it in his shadowed eyes and the fierce hunch of his shoulders.

But she would not . . . could not beg him. What she had to do now was protect her child. And

Pippa.

Pippa couldn't be pulled from her side after losing her mother. Pippa wouldn't be able to bear

losing another mama. The thought gave steel to Charlotte's backbone. She thrust the utter despair

in her heart to the side.

"You mustn't take Pippa away," she said. "She has suffered too much already."

"It will be better for her," Alex retorted. He turned away from Charlotte and stared across the

great, soft green slope leading toward the house. Then he turned back and looked at his wife.

"How can I leave her with a woman who is sleeping with my brother, Charlotte? Will you answer

that? Even when I thought you had been false to me before marriage, I didn't really believe you

would keep up that behavior after we married. More fool I."

"I didn't - " Charlotte stopped. This was a reiteration of their wedding night. He didn't believe her

then, and he would never believe her now. He was simply too influenced by his first marriage.

She felt such a leaden pain in her chest that she almost fell over.

There was no point in talking. But one thing she had to say.

"You promised to trust me," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "You promised." Then she

turned and walked away, and no voice called her back.

Charlotte kept her back very straight, all the way into the house.
But she climbed the stairs

slowly, one hand on the small of her back. She felt like an old, a
very old woman. The baby

seemed to be pulling her forward. She finally reached the second
floor and, turning left, walked

straight into Sophie's bedchamber.

Sophie gasped and sat up. She had been drowsing in the warm
afternoon sun, puzzling over a

book of love sonnets written in Portuguese - Sophie, to her mother's great annoyance, showed

an acute and unladylike passion for reading literature in its original language.

"What's the matter?" she asked sharply. Charlotte was standing in the doorway, swaying slightly,

her face dead white.

"The baby's coming!" Sophie swung her feet over the edge of the bed, alarm shaking her to the

bottom of her fingers. It was too early; the baby wasn't due for three weeks.

"No." Charlotte shook her head slowly from side to side. "No, no, no. He's back." She paused and

collected herself again, her body visibly trembling.

"Who's - oh," Sophie said. She had wondered over the last month whether she should warn

Charlotte of Alex's possible reaction.

But then she kept thinking that anxiety wasn't good for pregnancy, and perhaps Alex wasn't as

rash and stupid as the majority of men she had met in her life. But obviously he was just the

same as the others.

"He doesn't think the baby is his," Sophie said flatly.

Charlotte's eyes flew to hers. "You knew!" "I thought it was likely. Men are such unmitigated

idiots."

"He wants to take the unborn babies away . . . my baby and Pippa. He is going to take them

away." Charlotte was clutching her stomach, very close to hysteria. Sophie cast a worried eye on

her. Hysteria probably wasn't any better for unborn babies than anxiety.

Sophie moved over and stood in front of Charlotte, her eyes commanding her friend's attention.

"Don't get overwrought, Charlotte.

It's not good for the baby. We have to think,." Sophie pushed Charlotte into a sitting position on

her bed.

"Where is he now?" "I don't know ... I left him in the summer house." Sophie felt a perk of

approval at that news. At least: Charlotte had left him, rather than the other way around.

"Are you absolutely sure about what he plans to do, Charlotte? Perhaps he just spoke in the heat

of anger.."

"He said he couldn't have his children brought up by a whore, and if the baby was born in the

near future he would take it with him to London." Charlotte's voice was deadly calm. "He also

said that he had already told his solicitor to draw up a bill! for divorce."

When she looked at Sophie her face was frozen, tearless eyes looking from a dead white face. "I

can't let him do it, Sophie. Do you think he can?" "The law is on his side." Sophie was; thinking

fast. What they really needed around here was Patrick, the big gallump who had encountered

them at the musicale and started all this mess. If anyone could convince Alex that Charlotte was

innocent, it was Patrick. But where was he? Perhaps Alex knew.

Sophie looked back at Charlotte. She looked fractionally more like herself. "I'm leaving,"

Charlotte said. Her eyes met Sophie's. "I'm leaving and I'm taking Pippa with me. I love her; I

love her as if she were my own child." You thought she was your

own child, a voice screamed in

her mind. Charlotte steadily ignored it. She couldn't afford to listen. "I can't leave her here with a

madman," she said. "We'll go to Wales. I doubt that Alex would remember that I have a house

there."

"Don't be stupid!" Sophie snapped. "He's your husband - everything belongs to him now."

"No, it doesn't. My father negotiated a peculiar dowry based on the rumors surrounding Alex's

first marriage. He believed Alex, but he demanded that I retain my own property. And Alex . . .

Alex didn't care." She pushed away the memory of a laughing Alex, insisting that he didn't give a

snap of his fingers for her money. That was Alex before their wedding, when he thought she was

a virgin. What a tangled mess this is, she thought in a moment of dispassionate logic.

"So the house in Wales is my property. I shall go there until the baby is born, and then I am going

to travel to America."

Sophie thought about this. Charlotte was clearly hysterical, even given her collected tone. She

couldn't take Alex's children and move to America; they would find her and throw her in jail. On

the other hand, Sophie judged that Alex probably needed a cooling-down period. Not too long,

because he had to be there for Charlotte's delivery or he might never believe that the child was

his.

"All right," Sophie said with sudden resolution. "How are we going to get out of the house

without Alex knowing?" "Oh, Sophie. You are a sweetheart, but

you can't come with me. You'd

be ruined."

"Don't be a fool. I won't be ruined."

"Yes, you will," Charlotte insisted passionately. "You won't be able to get married if you run off

with me - my God, you probably shouldn't even be visiting me now!" Sophie looked at Charlotte

wryly. Clearly this was the first time such a thought crossed Charlotte's mind. She was such an

innocent! "Sweetheart, don't you realize that it's all about money? I am my father's heir. Nothing

could ruin me except being found absolutely naked in someone's bedroom."

"I don't believe you, Sophie. Look what ruined me: a faint and a touch on Patrick's cheek."

"You're married," Sophie explained. "Once you are married, it's all different. A married woman

can sleep with as many men as she wants, as long as she is absolutely discreet. Because common

adultery is not really interesting. You may make the gossip columns but you won't be ruined. But

a wrong move in an interesting direction - say, showing affection for your husband's brother, and

compounding that with getting pregnant in his absence, and not showing how close you are to

giving birth - well, that can ruin a woman. But even that kind of ruination can be salvaged,

because you are so very rich, Charlotte, and so is Alex."

Charlotte digested all this in silence. "It doesn't matter," she finally said flatly. "Because Alex

thinks I did sleep with his brother. I suppose if I stayed here and the baby was born tomorrow, he

would believe that the child was his. But he would still take the

child away. He thought I was a ...

a trollop before."

"Why?" Sophie asked.

Charlotte hesitated. She had never told Sophie the reason why she and Alex had such a

tempestuous wedding night.

"I slept with him before we got married," Charlotte said. "I slept with him at a ball." She couldn't

bring herself to say it was at the Hookers' Ball, so-called. "And he doesn't remember it, and

thinks I slept with his brother. So to him all of this gossip just confirmed that I really love his

brother. Oh, God, how could I have been so stupid!" Because now Charlotte realized that of

course Alex would have believed the article. Of course he wouldn't think the child was his.

Sophie was looking at Charlotte with fascination. She sat down next to her. "You slept with him

... at a ball!" Charlotte nodded.

"And he doesn't remember? Lord, how many women has he deflowered at a ball?" Charlotte

shook her head helplessly. "We never discussed the place. He jumped to the conclusion, on our

wedding night, that I had slept with Patrick. And then he refused to talk about it again. He

promised ... he promised," Charlotte's voice caught on a sob, but she steadied herself. "He

promised to trust me."

Sophie gave her a sympathetic squeeze. She had virtually no belief in male promises, but it didn't

seem the right moment to point that out. Charlotte was extraordinarily beautiful when she was

her ordinary self, but pregnant . . . she was exquisite. It was very

hard to believe that a man had
allowed sex with Charlotte to slip his mind.

"I still can't believe that he doesn't remember sleeping with you -
especially given that you were
a virgin."

Charlotte shrugged. "He says he never met me before."

"Who do we need to bring with us?" Sophie said practically.

"Katy, Marie, and your maid," Charlotte replied. "Keating and
Mall are already in Wales, thank
goodness."

"The problem is that we need to get Alex out of the way. Let me
take care of it," Sophie said with

sudden vigor. She left Charlotte to find Katy and instruct her to
pack Pippa's things. Sophie

walked down the stairs, straining to hear Alex's deep voice. The
house was silent. Her feet

resounded on the marble floor of the entranceway as she
hesitated a minute. Then she headed for

the library. She entered and closed the door, leaning back against
it.

Alex was drinking a glass of brandy, his third that day. He looked
up without interest.

"If you have come to plead her case, you might as well forget it,"
he said curtly.

"Where is your brother?" Alex measured Sophie's length with his
heavy lidded eyes. "I feel sure

that my lovely wife can answer that question better than I can,"
he sneered.

"You need to find your brother," Sophie repeated. "Where is he?"
"In Leicestershire, they say.

Hunting."

"Can you find him?" "Why bother? I'm sure he'll show up here
sooner or later. He can't have had

all he wants of Charlotte's body, even if she is pregnant." He threw back the glass of brandy and

poured himself another.

"Can you find him?" "I suppose," Alex said with deadly irony. "But why bother?" "Because you

are an idiot and there's always the chance that your brother can bring you to your senses," Sophie

said, speaking with just as much irony as he had used. "On the other hand, he is your brother;

maybe he won't be able to remember who he slept with in the past five years or so."

Alex flashed her a look of acute dislike. "Hellion," he said unemotionally.

"I may be a hellion," Sophie bit back, "but I wouldn't ruin my family when there was no evidence

to justify it. Surely your conscience won't allow you to throw away your wife like a used cravat

before you even speak to her supposed seducer?" "Seducer? I would say that she was almost

certainly the seducer," Alex growled.

"You're splitting hairs, my lord," Sophie replied. "Are you afraid to talk to your brother? What

will you do when he tells you that he only met your wife twice, for extremely brief periods of

time?" Alex stared at her, a small pulse beating in the corner of his mouth.

Sophie stared back, her eyes steady. "Will you simply condemn your own twin brother, out of

hand, as you have condemned your wife? Without asking for an explanation?" Alex felt as if a

band was tightening around his forehead. "Just what would you have me do?" he asked harshly.

"I left my wife when she had her monthly bleeding, and I return to find her pregnant. Exactly

what explanation could she offer?" Sophie ignored this statement. She was none too clear about

the progress of pregnancy, and certainly not enough to quibble over medical facts.

"She says you promised to trust her."

The words dropped into the charged silence between them like small leaden weights. Alex kicked

the log burning in the fireplace.

Maybe he should seek out Patrick. What the hell was he to do tonight, anyway? Banish his wife

to Scotland in the dark? "Can you find him and return before three weeks?" "Yes," Alex said

absently, not even thinking about Sophie's odd question. Braddon Chatwin lived two days' ride

from Downes Manor. "All right," he said finally, straightening up with a last vicious kick at the

burning log. "Tell my wife" - bitingly - "that she should be ready to travel to Scotland a week

from now."

Sophie nodded and slipped back out of the door of the study. She didn't trust herself to speak

again, she was so angry. Ten minutes later the front door slammed and Alex shouted for his

horse.

Sophie and Charlotte looked at each other over the piles of clothes littering Charlotte's bed. Three

maids were bustling about, helping Marie pack. Charlotte fingered a little pile of soft white baby

garments.

"He didn't . . . show any signs of relenting?" she whispered.

Sophie shook her head. Charlotte took a gulping breath of air. Sophie said firmly, "After we get

to Scotland, Charlotte, you can buy more things for the baby."

Charlotte looked at her, startled. Sophie nodded toward the four women in the room and drew

Charlotte toward the door. "Come on, darling. Let's go play with Pippa. We can leave first thing in the morning."

"No!" Charlotte protested in the hallway. "I want to leave tonight!" "It's not good for the baby.

You need to rest." Sophie's voice admitted no arguments. "If we tell everyone that our destination

is Scotland, it will throw Alex off the trail for a week or so."

Charlotte nodded. It was true that every bone in her body ached to lie down, especially now that

she knew Alex was out of the house.

"I'll send a tray to your room," Sophie said consolingly. "We can leave first thing in the morning."

That night Charlotte fell into a sleep so deep that she hardly stirred on the pillows. Toward

morning a dream flowered, a seductively tender memory. She was back in Scotland with Alex, in

the days when they were so happy. They had gone for a picnic on the banks of Grouse Lake. Katy

had taken Pippa back to the house for a nap, and Alex's eyes were glowing as the carriage bore

their child away.

"The coach won't return for at least fifteen minutes." Alex's deep voice was seductive,

suggestive. He slipped off one of Charlotte's peach-colored slippers and ran his fingers over the

delicate arch of her foot. "It's not enough time for ... a five-course meal," Alex murmured. He

bent his head and white teeth bit her toes gently.

He plucked a white daisy from the tender green grass by her feet

and rubbed it on her thigh, just

above the top of her stockings.

Waves of erotic heat washed up Charlotte's legs. Alex began to move up her body with small

wolfish bites, laughing at her gasping remonstrances. In her sleep Charlotte's face eased into a

blissful smile.

But then the dream suddenly changed. She was standing on the wharf that led out into the lake,

and a fog had come up. Tendrils of snaky white were twining about her feet, drifting off the

water. Fogs came up so quickly in Scotland; one minute the sun was shining and the next minute

the world was ghastly, faintly shiny with dew. She looked about, calling for her husband. Then to

her horror she heard a floundering, splashing noise and a little voice calling, "Mama! Mamaaa!"

Charlotte woke up, her heart beating so fast that she felt as if she were ill. The baby in her womb

had woken up too and was dancing a brisk tattoo. She breathed in gasps, trying to calm down.

She was in her own bed, and Pippa was fast asleep in the nursery. Pippa was not drowning in a

black Scottish lake, calling for her mama.

Finally Charlotte's heart slowed and she leaned back. Something in me has changed, she realized,

soothing the small, sharp bumps that were her baby's kicking feet. Pippa ... I have to protect my

children, Charlotte thought fiercely. To hell with Alex's kisses and his passion. It was empty;

without trust; based on lust. He had used her, like a meal spread out before him, and then he

dumped her as casually as he might reject venison if he felt like

eating veal.

And he didn't care about the babies anyway. He waltzed off to France without a second thought

about Pippa. Charlotte spread her hands on her tummy, caressing the round bump that she

thought was perhaps a head, or maybe a bottom. "I promise," she whispered into the hushed

night. "I promise I will love you, and trust you, and never, never let you drown in a lake." Her

eyes filled with tears despite herself. It would be so lovely if there were two of them, if Alex and

she could love each other and the babies. But there wasn't any way that could happen. And so for

yet another night the Countess of Sheffield and Downes cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 21

Alex found his brother only after four hard days of riding. He reached Braddon Chatwin's country

house in two days but found to his intense irritation that the "young master" had left a few days

earlier. Alex slapped his gloves against his leg, staring with unconscious, arrogant rage at the

wilting butler before him.

"What do you mean, man, you're not sure where they went? Either you know or you don't. If you

don't, say so clearly."

"What I meant," Treble said humbly, "was that his lordship expressed the intention to travel to

Bath - and of course your brother, my lord, was accompanying him. But the party may well have

stopped at Singleton Manor, that would be the Earl of Slaslow's estate in Kent."

"The party" Alex barked, "what is this, a summer parade? Are there women traveling with

them?"

Treble cast his eyes on the marble floor at his feet, looking vainly for support. He looked up only

to say, "I used the word loosely, my lord. The group consisted of the Earl of Slaslow and your

brother. And - " he half mumbled, "there is also an acquaintance of Lord Foakes's, a young

female, my lord."

It was Alex's turn to lapse into silence. "Female" could only mean one thing: Patrick was

transporting a ladybird with him from hunting lodge to hunting lodge. Nothing new there. Except

that it meant that Patrick had left a pregnant Charlotte alone in order to disport himself with a

mistress. Treble shook with terror, seeing how the earl's face seemed, impossibly, to grow even

darker and more menacing.

"Did this - female - arrive with my brother?" "Yes, my lord." And when Alex stared at him, his

eyes boring into his skull, Treble added uncomfortably, "The young woman arrived shortly after

your brother and the master came from London; that is, I believe that the assignation was made in

London and the young, uh, lady simply took a few days to pack. She is traveling with a good deal

of clothing," Treble said with feeling. It had taken his staff almost five hours to unload the trunks

from the roof of the carriage; it was worse than receiving a duchess, in his opinion.

The girl didn't travel with her own sheets the way nobility did, but she had brought forty-eight

hats, each in its own hatbox! Alex turned his back with a curt thanks and walked back down the

marble steps. Before him the sky was streaked a bitter orange color, layers of clouds stained by

the setting sun. Alex stared at it blindly. He was beginning to have a very curious sense of

uneasiness. Would Patrick have tired of Charlotte's body so soon? He himself had her, Alex

thought savagely, for some three months and he knew with a deep inner certainty that he would

have happily taken her body to bed with him for the next three - hell, the next thirty - years.

Perhaps Charlotte had cut off the affair. Perhaps Charlotte did love him, and she only succumbed

to Patrick because she had lost her virginity to him. Alex scoffed at himself. What was he

thinking? She slept with his brother for old times' sake? Out of

nostalgia? The brutal fact was

that Charlotte was bleeding when he left and when he returned she was pregnant. And nothing

mattered but those two facts. He ignored the plaintive voice of Treble calling after him, asking

whether he wished to spend the night at Selfridge Manor. The last thing he wanted to do was

sleep anywhere his brother had been. Alex strode over to his waiting horse and swung up in one

swift, muscled lunge. He nodded at the mounted manservant who was leading Alex's stallion,

Bucephalus.

"I'm going to the Fox and Keys, Harry," he said curtly. "You'd best walk Bucephalus. It's been a

long day."

Two days later, Alex galloped into the drive of Singleton Manor, one of Braddon Chatwin's

country houses, around nine in the evening. His eyes keenly swept the front of the sprawling

stone manor and he felt a glow of satisfaction. He'd finally caught them.

The pale gray stone of the manor house was darkened by glowing candlelight shining from many

of the house's windows; Braddon had to be in residence.

Alex threw Bucephalus's reins to the bowing footman. He paused for a second next to the portly

butler as he held open the eight-foot-high door.

"Where is he?" Alex snapped.

"It is an honor to see you again, my lord," Braddon's butler Vorset said gently. He was too old to

be bullied by young sparks like this one, he thought to himself. "The master and Lord Fakes can

be found in the library."

Alex paused for a moment, his stern face cracking into a reluctant smile. "I'm glad you're still on

your feet, Vorset." Vorset had never snapped at the ill-behaved twins when they visited Braddon

during school holidays, years ago. To tell the truth, Alex and Patrick had led Braddon into some

of his worst scrapes, which Vorset knew but never revealed to Braddon's parents.

Vorset nodded slightly, his eyes kind. Like the rest of England, he knew something of Alexander

Foakes's marital problems. "The library is off to the right, my lord," he murmured, leading the

way.

Alex followed the old butler down the well-known, wide passageway to the library. Lord, he

hadn't been in this house for some ten years. After his mother died he and Patrick had been

farmed out to whomever was available for holidays. They used to tear about Braddon's house as

if they were wild pigs released indoors by accident.

Vorset opened the library doors without announcing him, a tribute to his closeness with the

family. As Vorset disappeared back down the corridor, Alex paused in the doorway. There was a

huge fire burning in the marble fireplace, taking the spring chill off the air. The draft going up the

chimney was making the candelabra flicker. Still, the scene before him was clear enough.

Braddon Chatwin was moodily reading what looked to be a stud report. And nested in a settee

before the fire was Alex's brother. For a moment Alex forgot his rage and just let his heart feel

glad to see Patrick again. His twin was like his arm, he realized suddenly. No matter how much

he hated him, he would be devastated if anything happened to him. Patrick looked thinner, his

skin tanned dark brown by the Indian sun. He was whispering into the ear of a lovely redhead,

who was giggling softly at whatever nonsense Patrick was murmuring.

Alex cleared his throat deliberately. Braddon looked about; no one else even looked up.

Braddon's clear blue eyes met Alex's for a brief moment and then he said, "Patrick, my buck,

there's someone here to see you."

Patrick didn't move, his black curls bent over the mass of red hair seated next to him.

"Patrick!" Braddon insisted.

Finally Patrick looked up. But something about Alex's coiled aggression as he leaned casually in

the doorway made him pause. The twins could always read each other without speaking; Patrick

knew from the other side of the room that Alex was filled with a cold, cold rage, greater than

anything Patrick remembered.

Patrick walked slowly over to Alex and stopped in front of him. His arching eyebrows flew up as

he asked his twin a silent question.

Alex's black eyes raked Patrick's face. For a moment the library was absolutely still, and no noise

broke the air but the hiss and crackle of green logs burning in the fireplace.

"Hell," Alex said quietly. "You didn't do it, did you?" Patrick stayed where he was. "I didn't sleep

with your wife, if that's what you mean."

Alex's face was a tight, cold mask. When he didn't respond, Patrick dropped an arm around his

brother's shoulder and turned him around. Alex turned automatically, as if he were sleepwalking.

The two men walked out of the library without looking backward.

"Lud!" Miss Arabella Calhoun breathed. (She was the red-haired enchantress who had been

sharing Patrick's sofa.) "He's a mean-looking one, isn't he?" When Braddon didn't answer she

stretched a dainty foot out before her and carefully inspected it on all sides. She quite liked these

slippers. They were French, of course, and pale blue, embroidered with small white doves.

Braddon drifted over and rested his arms on the back of the sofa.

"What do you think, Braddon?" Miss Arabella asked dreamily. She used the earl's first name

because she believed in maintaining terms of the greatest intimacy with all male friends of her

current amour. And the minute Patrick walked out of the library with his brother she realized that

in fact her particular amour might be a thing of the past. Patrick appeared to have family

problems.

Arabella shuddered. She hated family problems: so dreary, so tiresome, so unromantic.

"Think of what?" "Think of my shoes!" Braddon stared at them. This is why he never got

anywhere with women. What could a person say about shoes? "They're very . . . they're very

small."

Arabella shot him an annoyed look. This one was a lout, that was for sure. But he was looking at

her so anxiously that she relented.

"Well, Braddon," she said, patting the cushion next to her. "Since

Patrick took himself off

without even bothering to say a word, why don't you join me?"
And it was a good thing she

extended that invitation. Because around an hour later, when
Vorset appeared to offer drinks and

refreshments, he announced that the Earl of Sheffield and
Downes and his brother had both

galloped off without mentioning when they might return.

"Well, I like that!" Arabella said, her eyes filling with easy tears.
She turned to Braddon, who

was sitting very close beside her. "Isn't that the rudest thing you
ever heard? I didn't have to

accompany that bounder all the way out into the country. Men
line up by the theater door every

night just to ask me to dinner!" "I know," Braddon said, taking
Arabella's hand. "I was one of

them." He stared soulfully into Miss Arabella's eyes, and she felt
herself perk up a bit.

After all, as she confided to her maid later that night, one man is
much like another, aren't they?

And while Patrick was more handsome, Braddon was much more
amenable.

Shoes - hats - everything was so expensive these days! As a
silvery slip of a moon swung into

the sky above the dark forest lining the road, Patrick reached out
and jerked on his brother's reins.

Alex's horse was lathered with sweat and panting heavily, his
sides blowing in and out painfully

as they drew to a halt.

"We must stop now, Alex."

Alex shot him a ferocious glance. Patrick calmly ignored it,
leading his horse off on a road to the

right whose crooked sign read Buffington, One Mile.

"There's a decent inn in Buffington," Patrick shouted back over his shoulder.

Then he stopped and wheeled his horse about, sensing that his brother wasn't following him

down the Buffington road.

"For goodness sake, man! She's not going anywhere; Charlotte is pregnant. She'll be there

waiting for you, and a few hours won't matter."

Alex's face was an immobile, dark shadowed mask. Patrick walked his desperately exhausted

horse back the few steps to the cleft in the road. Alex looked at him.

"She's going to leave me, Patrick," he finally said, hoarsely. "I promised I would trust her, and I

failed her. I have to get to the house and follow her. I have to find her."

Patrick sighed. He hadn't been able to get any sense out of his twin since Alex grasped the fact

that his brother not only had no part in his wife's pregnancy, he hardly knew the woman.

"Charlotte is not going anywhere! She's pregnant. Pregnant women don't travel." Patrick vested

his voice with a deep layer of authority, dismissing his memory of pregnant women trundling

happily up and down the roads of India. "Think of Mother. Don't you remember when she was

pregnant? She went to bed for months."

It was an unhappy thought, one that drained the last bit of color from Alex's face.

"My God," Alex whispered. "What if she's like Mother, what if she dies, Patrick?" "Charlotte is a

sensible woman, Alex. She wouldn't endanger the life of her child. She will be sitting in Downes

Manor waiting for you when you get back. I'm not saying that she won't take your head off. But

she won't risk the child's life to run away."

Alex blinked. That was the first argument he'd heard which made sense. Maybe he was wrong in

his deep conviction that Charlotte was, even now, riding away from him on some road. That he

would never see her again. She wouldn't endanger the babe, that was true.

Patrick sensed his victory and grabbed Alex's bridle again, forcing his horse to walk off toward

Buffington.

"We'll be up at dawn. Even if she did decide to travel to Scotland - and mind you, I think the

chance is exceedingly slim - she necessarily will go very slowly. We won't have any trouble

catching up with her."

Alex didn't respond, just nodded. They plodded their way into the

Queen's Ankle, Buffington's

best inn, ate squirrel stew (the only food available), and fell into the two beds that graced the innkeeper's sole spare room.

"Lord," Patrick said crossly. "When do you suppose that fat ass downstairs last had the straw

turned in this damned mattress?" Alex didn't bother to respond. He was staring up at the uneven

planks above him, wondering where his life went wrong. What led him to suspect Charlotte of

adultery? His mind kept replaying the scene in the little summer house, as if to torture himself.

Charlotte would rise, a tremendous sweetness trembling in her eyes and mouth, and then . . . he

would reject her. When he finally spoke, his voice was harsh and grating.

"If she's gone, I don't know what I'll do, Patrick."

Patrick rolled his eyes in the darkness, thanking his lucky stars for never having been touched by

the tender emotion called love.

"She's not going anywhere, Alex. For God's sake." They fell silent.

Given Alex's punishing speed, it only took two and a half days to return to Downes Manor. The

minute they entered the drive Patrick's heart sank. Alex was right. The house had an odd, eerie

stillness.

Alex dropped Bucephalus's reins right there, in the drive, and charged through the front door. It

wasn't locked and a startled footman leaped out of the library as the door slammed open.

"My lord!" "Where's my wife?" Alex bellowed.

The footman's eyes were glued to the floor. "I couldn't say, my lord . . . that is, I have no idea,"

he stammered.

Patrick strolled forward, opening a door and looking into a salon to the left. Behind him Alex

reduced the footman to quivering jelly.

The footman appeared to be suggesting that the countess had proceeded to Scotland. Patrick

turned around, asking mildly, "Where's your butler, Alex?" "The butler! Where's the butler?"

Alex added a string of expletives.

"You don't have one in this house, my lord," the footman said with some dignity. "My lady had

interviewed several candidates and I believe she was about to appoint a butler, but you returned. .

. ." His voice trailed off.

Patrick noticed with interest that although the man was clearly unnerved by Alex's shouting, he

showed no signs of being cowed. In fact, when he raised his eyes to Alex's face, surely he

looked - could he be contemptuous? Patrick intervened again. "Did the countess take her maid

with her?" The footman shifted his eyes to the floor once again. "Yes."

"Was anyone else traveling in the party?" When the footman hesitated, Patrick added, "Your

loyalty to your mistress is - " But his sentence was broken off by Alex.

"Of course! Sophie York was here. They must have gone to her mother."

"I doubt it."

"Why the hell not?" Alex turned his burning eyes on Patrick.

"Because the Marchioness of Brandenburg would never admit your wife into her house," Patrick

said. "Charlotte has been branded a whore the length and

breadth of England. I am very surprised

to hear that Sophie York was allowed to visit at all."

"Was Charlotte that scorned?" "I would be surprised if anyone would speak to her at all," Patrick

said gently. "I'm sorry, Alex. There was nothing I could do; I stayed as far away as I could. If I

had even been seen in her vicinity, it could only further ruin her reputation."

"But Sophie York was here when I returned."

"She looked like the loyal type," Patrick said. He remembered very well the clear, fierce eyes of

the girl who had caught Alex's wife when she fainted at the musicale. Sophie looked at him with

such condemnation that her eyes actually haunted him for a few days, until he shook off the

memory by chasing and winning Arabella Calhoun, the much-admired singer at the Theater

Royal.

Damnation, Patrick thought with a start. I left Arabella back at Brad-don's house. It was the first

time she had crossed his mind since Alex appeared in the doorway of the library. Then he

dismissed her with a mental shrug. Bella would always land on her feet.

"Oh, God," Alex said. His words dropped into the silence filling the hall.

Cecil, the footman in question, nervously cast his eyes at the floor. It sounded as if the earl was

sorry for all the problems he caused; it sounded as if the madness was over. Cecil thought

nervously of Marie's whispered analysis. She had said that the earl was the only one who could

stop the scandal and allow her mistress to return to society. So

should he, Cecil, reveal his

mistress's whereabouts? Patrick shot a sharp glance at the footman. That man knew where

Charlotte had gone, that was certain. But Patrick judged that if he pushed him the servant might

become obstinate out of pure loyalty.

"Time for dinner," he said to the footman. "Is there a chef in the house?" Cecil nodded. "Oh, yes,

my lord, the countess hired a chef immediately. He's been here for months. His name is Rossi.

He's Italian.

The countess - " He looked at his master. "The countess felt that the earl might appreciate Italian

food after his sojourn in Italy."

"Oh, God," Alex repeated.

"You're starting to sound like a bronze gong," Patrick said cheerfully. He pushed open the door to

the yellow salon.

"Bring us some drinks, will you? What is your name?" "Cecil, sir."

"Well, Cecil, you're the butler-in-charge. I'd like some whiskey, and so would my brother."

As the doors swung to behind the brothers, Cecil swallowed nervously. Had he done the right

thing, keeping it secret that he knew where the countess had gone? No one else in the household

knew. They all thought she had set off for Scotland. But of course Marie had told him the truth,

that the party was heading for Wales.

Then Cecil trotted off, shelving the problem for the moment. Rossi might be Italian, rather than

French, but he was just as temperamental as the French chef in London. He'd need to be warned

as soon as possible that he was required to produce a proper seven-course dinner.

In the yellow salon Alex slumped on a couch, staring straight ahead. Patrick wandered around the

room, picking up small objects and looking at them absentmindedly.

"This room looks different," he said.

Alex didn't look up. "I need to find out when she left," he said dully. "Do you think she went to

Scotland?" Patrick didn't bother to answer. He had the full intention of screwing the whole truth

out of that footman - but not until after dinner. If he knew Alex, his brother would insist on

riding off for parts unknown before dinner. Patrick was sick of galloping down dangerous roads

at night, vulnerable to highwaymen and God knows what else. Maybe he wouldn't approach the

footman until tomorrow morning.

"Were you responsible for refurbishing the house, or was Charlotte?" he asked, with an air of

mild curiosity.

"I haven't entered the house since before father died."

"Your wife has an eye for color."

"She's a painter."

"Hmmm," Patrick responded.

"She's a real painter," Alex barked. "She paints portraits, and they're brilliant. She said she might

paint me. . . ." He lapsed into silence again.

Patrick was examining a painting on the wall, with some interest.

"Not that," Alex said irritably. "That's a Rossetti. I feel as if someone threw a black sack over my

head and was slowly choking me."

Patrick came back to the couch and sat down in the opposite corner from his brother, stretching

out his long, muscular legs. He threw his head back and looked up at the ceiling. Charlotte had

had its peeling, faint decoration restored; the ceiling brushed with lazy-looking noblemen and

their ladies, picnicking by an elaborately winding stream.

"Why did you do it, Alex? I only met Charlotte twice, but I would have judged her effortlessly

honest and true as steel. More, she loved you," he said ruthlessly. "I felt sorry for her, suffering

through an obscene scandal that broke out over nothing: but I never thought that you would

subscribe to it."

"When I left for Italy she told me she had her monthly," Alex replied. "I found she wasn't a virgin

on our wedding night, but she told me that she had lost her virginity to me. I knew that wasn't

true, so I decided she must have lost her virginity to you. Then when I returned, I heard about her

fainting when you appeared, and there she was, pregnant."

"You're a fool," Patrick said, not unkindly. "Have you remembered when you slept with her?"

"You've met Charlotte, Patrick. Do you think you could forget taking her virginity?" "You should

give it serious thought. She's not a liar."

"Well, what about you?" "As it happens, virgins have been few and far between in my life. I tend

to give 'em a wide berth. I deflowered one woman, and she was an Indian maiden on the banks of

the Ganges River. It's a nice memory, but irrelevant."

"We're even. I too slept with one virgin, but she had red hair, and it took place at the Hookers'

Ball."

Patrick thought about the implication that his sister-in-law had attended the Hookers' Ball. He

opened his mouth - but then he closed it again. He was tired and hungry and didn't feel like

wrangling over details with Alex. Once they tracked his wife down they could sort out the

particulars.

There was a discreet knock and the door swung open. Cecil stood there, blinking nervously. He

held a silver platter in one hand but said nothing.

"How on earth did you get the name Cecil?" Patrick asked with a touch of malice. "Did your

mother have delusions of grandeur?" Cecil shook his head from side to side. "She admired the

nobility," he said briefly. He advanced into the room and bowed before Alex. "A message has

arrived for you, my lord."

Alex snatched the white envelope off the silver salver, almost tearing it in half in his eagerness to

open the letter.

"My God," he said. "It's from her, Sophie York. They're in Wales. She says" - and his voice

strengthened with indignation - "that if I would like to attend the birth of my child I should make

haste."

"You deserve it." Patrick eyed the footman, who was looking distinctly relieved. "Off with you,"

he said curtly. "You had a lucky escape."

Cecil bowed his way out of the room, agreeing with younger Fakes with all his heart.

Patrick was feeling distinctly sour. He could see dinner disappearing from before his eyes. Sure

enough, Alex had already bounded out of the room and started howling for his horse. Patrick

dragged himself out of the comfortable couch, throwing a last look at the happy ladies frolicking

about on the ceiling. Taking Alex's punishing speed into account, it would take them two days to

get to Wales. Two more days before he could have a decent meal. In the hall he pulled on his

greatcoat and strolled out the door slowly, just to annoy his brother who was already mounted on

a nervous steed. With a sigh Patrick leaped on top of a fresh horse, loosed the rein, and pounded

after his brother down the dark, tree-lined drive.

Chapter 22 Charlotte's voice rose to a shriek. "No! No! No!" She hunched over, protecting her

huge belly. "He's only here to take my baby! Make him leave - " Her voice broke off as she

stumbled against the bedpost, swallowed into a great slashing wave of pain. The room was silent

except for Charlotte's harsh pants.

Alex stared at his wife in horror. Had he been blind? She was wearing a light shift, drenched with

perspiration. The swollen outline of her belly was clearly visible. She was bigger than the woman

he saw give birth in Italy, he thought with a pulse of alarm. The baby must be enormous.

A hand grasped his arm. "My lord, you must leave this room," said a courteous voice at his ear.

Alex swung about wildly. A doctor was standing before him, looking at him gravely but with an

unmistakable air of command.

"You're very young," Alex said.

"You must leave this room now," Dr. Seedland said. "Your wife's birth is proceeding well, for a

first baby. But she cannot lose strength arguing with you. The child is large."

"Please . . . please make him go away!" Alex looked back at Charlotte. She had been clinging to

the bedpost, but she pulled herself up. Her hair was roughly pulled back from her face; her eyes

were enormous and black. Oh, my God, she's in pain, Alex thought. He felt such a wave of

tenderness that he instinctively started toward her. But the doctor's arm tightened on his like a

vise.

"Out," he said. "You must not remain here."

"Go away," Charlotte said pleadingly. Her pupils were so dilated that her eyes looked like black

pools. "Please, please, go away."

She broke down and started weeping.

"My lady." The doctor turned around, frustrated. "You must not waste strength like this!" Sophie

wrapped her arms around Charlotte's shaking shoulders and met Alex's eyes with a silent order.

Slowly he backed out the door, even as he heard Sophie's soothing words.

"It's all right, darling. I won't let him take your baby. I'm here."

And, as the door swung to, he heard a wailing scream. Charlotte had been hit by another

contraction.

Alex stood outside the door, struck to the core with the enormity of his own idiocy. His

wife - his wife! - was delivering his child, and she had looked at him with utter terror. His heart

wrenched with grief and self-loathing. It would be better if he just went out and shot himself.

But at that moment Patrick's strong arms circled around him in a rough, unaccustomed hug. They

stood for a moment, two large, powerful men. In the twilight of the corridor they looked

uncannily identical. The silence was broken by a shuddering scream, and another, and another,

arching above the murmur of voices in Charlotte's bedroom.

The doctor's voice rose above the rest. "My lady, you must stop screaming and conserve your

strength. Lower your voice!" Alex struggled in Patrick's arms. "My God, he's yelling at her. I'll

kill him!" he said through clenched teeth.

Patrick gripped his hands on Alex's shoulders. "Have you seen a

woman give birth before?" "It

was different," Alex said fiercely. "She just lay down and there was the baby . . . blood, but then

she had a glass of wine, and the baby started sucking."

"Probably the fifth or sixth baby," Patrick said. "You know that women die in childbirth, Alex.

Think of mother. It happens all the time, and most frequently with the first baby. Charlotte has to

conserve her strength. The doctor is right. I saw a woman die, in India. She simply didn't have the

strength after a while."

Alex pushed out of his brother's embrace and leaned against the corridor, shuddering all over.

There was silence in the bedroom.

Then the horrible cries erupted again. Patrick gave him a little shake.

"I'm going to take your daughter into the village and leave her with the vicar's wife," he said.

"Charlotte can be heard all over the house." He strode away.

Alex leaned against the wall without replying. By two hours later he was praying, fiercely,

promising anything and everything he owned. Charlotte had stopped screaming, but he didn't

know whether that was bad or good. It didn't sound good. The contractions were still coming, but

all he heard were whimpers and harsh, groaning breathing.

He couldn't even think, caught in the grip of an agonized grief so large that he felt black water

closing over his head. Charlotte was his heart and his soul. She was being tortured in the next

room and he couldn't even hold her in his arms because he had made her too afraid of him.

The hours crept by. Patrick brought him a slice of meat and a

glass of wine, which lay untouched

on a tray. He brought a couple of chairs and sat down next to Alex, a silent, comforting presence.

Alex couldn't bring himself to sit down. He stayed propped against the wall.

Then Sophie's voice came through the heavy oak door, sounding desperate.

"Charlotte! Charlotte! You must not give up! Wake up, wake up!"
There was an agitated murmur

of voices. Alex straightened. The doctor could go to hell. He was going in there. He opened the

door. The little cluster of people didn't even look up. Charlotte was on the bed now. She was

naked, her belly swelling from her slender body. A pulse of pure terror struck Alex's heart. He

could just glimpse her face and it had the look of death. She's going to die, he thought. She's

going to die. My lovely, lovely Charlotte is going to die.

He walked over to the bed. "Get out," Alex said fiercely. The doctor didn't look up; he was

waving smelling salts under Charlotte's nose, but she didn't even tremble at the fierce acid smell.

Alex grasped his arm and flung him back.

"Get out!" he bellowed. The little flock of women fell back from the bed in alarm.

The doctor finally looked at him, his eyes exhausted but steady. "My lord, the child is still alive. I

can try to rescue the child." The words fell into the silent room like heavy drops of water.

Alex stared at him in disbelief. Then he hissed through his teeth. "Get out."

Dr. Seedland gave him a look of compassion. "I will be outside. I can give you ten minutes," he

said. "After that point it will be too late to save the child either."
He put his hand on Charlotte's

forehead for a moment, looking down at his patient. Then he
ushered the three serving women

out of the room.

Only Sophie stayed exactly where she was, next to Charlotte's
head.

Alex looked down at Sophie's fierce, unforgiving face. "I have to
tell her," he said, his voice

breaking. "I have to tell her."

"She can't hear anymore," Sophie said flatly.

"Please, Sophie," Alex said. "Please." She looked at him and in the
deep blue depths of her eyes

he met a contempt that he had never encountered from another
human being. It pierced his heart

like an arrow.

"Please."

Sophie bowed her head. She leaned down and put a kiss on both
of Charlotte's closed eyelids.

They were dark violet, the veins swollen from her labor.
Charlotte's breath was very faint and far

away; she hardly stirred as a contraction rippled her stomach.

"Good-bye," Sophie whispered. "Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye."
Strong arms pulled her away.

Patrick pushed her over against the door. Then he came back and
hailed his brother around.

"You must wake her up, Alex. Wake her up and help her push.
She has to push the baby out, or

they will both die." Alex looked into his brother's face. Patrick's
eyes burned into his, giving him

strength.

Patrick turned and gathered up Sophie, who stood motionless by
the door where he had deposited

her. He opened the door and they walked into the empty corridor. Seedland has probably gone to

find a chamber pot, Patrick thought. He looked down at the fierce little person beside him. She

was shaking with deep, wrenching sobs, so strong that they could not escape her chest. She

struggled to breathe. Patrick gathered her into his arms and carried her into the bedchamber

across the hall. He sat in an armchair, reflexively stroking her hair.

"I killed her," Sophie said, gulping for air. "I killed her and I loved her. Oh God . . ."

Patrick was startled out of his fearful attempt to hear across the hallway and into the master

bedroom. "What?" "I killed her. If I hadn't sent the message, she would be fine. I thought, I

thought that he should know, so he couldn't suspect her of changing the baby's birth date. I

thought that if he was here for the birth, he would realize how stupid it was to suspect her."

"You were right to do it," Patrick assured her. He had no clear idea what Sophie was talking

about, but he kept stroking her silky curls.

"No, no, I wasn't," Sophie choked. "Because everything was going well before he came. They

were about to send me out of the room, and even though it was painful, she was brave . . . but

when he appeared, and she thought he was going to take the baby when it was born, it just

stopped. It stopped working. I told her, I kept telling her, that I wouldn't let him take the baby,

but she didn't believe me." Sobs took over her voice again.

Patrick cursed softly, under his breath. When he spoke, his voice was as ragged as hers. "It's not

Alex's fault," he said. "And it's not your fault. Births don't always work, especially with the first

baby. The baby, or the mother, can die."

"Or both," Sophie said drearily.

"Or both," Patrick said. He rested his cheek against the head of the woman whose name he hardly

knew. "But it's not your fault.

Alex realized what an ass he'd been, and he was on his way back. He loves her, you know. He

was a fool, but he loves her. So he should be there. When I saw this happen before, in India . . ."

he trailed off.

Sophie raised her head and looked at him, her blue eyes drenched in tears. "Did she suffer? I

mean, at the end?" "No. No, they called the husband, and he went in the room and was with her."

Sophie dropped back against his chest, exhausted.

"How long has it been?" she whispered.

"About three minutes." They both listened, but there was no sound from the hallway, not even the

doctor's returning footsteps.

In the master bedchamber Alex sat down on the bed beside Charlotte. She was very far away, in

some private space of her own where there was no pain. He could see it in the frail whiteness of

her face and her hushed breathing. He took her hands in his. As always, her delicate hands were

dwarfed by his huge fingers. He had a sudden flashing memory of her fingers deftly holding a

thin brush as she turned about to laugh at him, flicking a spot of red onto the front of his white

shirt. He had growled in mock anger and swooped down on her, carrying her to the divan. He

was such a fool! Why didn't he know that a man and woman don't make love like that, heart and

soul infused into each other, unless there is true emotion between them? He had confused Maria's

cold, loathsome couplings with their joyful passion.

A great numbing coldness invaded Alex's limbs. He had killed Charlotte. It was his fault. Unlike

Patrick, he needed no explanations for what had happened. He had frightened his wife so much

that she thought he would wrench the baby from her arms. So she gave up. Alex's heart lurched

in his chest. He hadn't felt this agony since he was eleven and his mother died in childbirth. His

mother would hate him if she knew what he had done to his own wife.

Something burning, hot, fell on his wrist. Alex realized it was his own tears. He hadn't cried

since his mother . . . He couldn't lose her. He couldn't lose Charlotte.

"Charlotte!" His voice emerged desperately from his strangled chest. "Charlotte, come back."

There was no response from the white figure on the bed, only a faint twisting as her body shook

from another contraction. "No!" Alex howled in agony, "No, God, no!" He bent over, putting his

lips to Charlotte's ear, holding her hands as tightly as he could.

"I love you, Charlotte, I love you. Oh, God, please hear me. Please, please, don't go, don't go

without hearing me. I found out how much I loved you in Italy. I was afraid ... I was afraid that

you didn't love me, or that you were like Maria. Oh, God, Charlotte, please wake up!" But there

was nothing. Tears fell down Alex's face and he leaned forward, pressing his face against

Charlotte's warm cheek. The silky warmth bolstered him, strengthened him. She wasn't dead yet!

He took a deep breath. Bring her back, Patrick had said. Bring her back and help her push. He put

his hands on her swollen tummy and the faint flicker of life he felt sent fire through his veins.

Their child was there as well, fighting for life.

Alex bent over again, putting his hands on Charlotte's cheeks. His voice was low and insistent

this time. "Charlotte, you must wake up. You must come back. The baby will die if you don't

come back, Charlotte. Our baby will die." He paused and looked down at her. Had her eyelids

nickered? Alex put his mouth so close to her face that his breath warmed her skin. He kissed her,

breathing warmth into her, pouring his strength into her. "Charlotte," he said again. "You must

wake up or our baby will die. Don't let our baby die, Charlotte!" Charlotte heard him, but only as

if his voice were a long way off, in a dream. It was Alex, she knew that. And he wasn't shouting

at her; he was pleading, almost begging. And then she understood what he was saying and with

the last bit of her energy she opened her eyes. Almost instantly a contraction gripped her and she

moaned, eyes closing, willing herself to fall back into the sweet, blessed darkness without pain.

Long eyelashes drifted down over her white cheeks.

But Alex's voice wouldn't let her. "Don't, Charlotte, don't! Our baby will die." His voice was

rasping with agony, but it was fiercely commanding as well. Charlotte opened her eyes again.

"Oh, God, Charlotte," Alex said. He cradled her face in his hands. "I love you, do you know

that?" And Charlotte, looking at him with pain-drenched eyes, saw agony She smiled a little and

turned her face against his hand, sliding back into the warm nest he had pulled her from.

Alex roughly pulled her into a half-sitting position. Charlotte groaned, but she was looking at

him again.

"Our baby," he was saying, "our baby, Charlotte!" Slowly it came back to her. Her baby; where

was her baby? Right on cue, another bone-shaking contraction crept up her abdomen.

She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Alex was gently caressing her

shoulders. The pain passed and she opened her eyes.

He was looking at her, his eyes wild and desperate. Charlotte blinked. "Charlotte, on the next

contraction, we're going to push the baby out, do you understand?" Alex's voice was so

commanding that she answered.

"I tried." Her voice was a wisp of sound.

"This time we're going to push together. You were alone before; now I'm going to push with you.

Feel how strong I am, Charlotte?" She nodded. He was gripping her hand as if he would never let

go.

The door opened and Dr. Seedland slipped through, alone. His eyes went instantly to the bed.

"All right, Doctor," Alex said without turning his head. "On the next contraction Charlotte and I

are going to push the baby out.

Because we want our baby to live, Charlotte. And if it doesn't come out, the baby will die." He

kept his eyes fastened on hers, as if he could hypnotize her into

strength.

Charlotte took a deep breath. She was fully back now; back in her pain-wracked, exhausted body.

Somehow logic had come back as well. She had to get the baby out. Yet logic, in fact, had

deserted her, because as she explained later, Alex said he was going to push the baby out, and she

agreed. She was too tired; it would be good if he could take over now.

So when the contraction started, instead of trying to control the pain Charlotte just relaxed into it

and when Alex's hands tightened and his voice beat at her head, saying "Push, push!" she thought

about the baby dying, and that Alex was pushing, and she wrenched her whole soul down to her

stomach. And pushed.

"I see the head," Dr. Seedland said unemotionally. He looked at Alex with a gleam of approval.

"We need one more like that, my lord."

Alex turned back to Charlotte. She was lying back, hair plastered to her scalp with sweat. She

looked as if she'd been in a good fight and had come out on the losing side. She was the most

beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He bent down and kissed her mouth.

Charlotte didn't stir. He bit her lip sharply. Her eyes flew open.

There he was again, bothering her. She frowned at him.

"We need to do it one more time, Charlotte. Come on, the contraction is coming. We can get the

baby out this time, Charlotte!" And then, in answer to her unspoken plea, "Just one more time,

Charlotte." And he hoped it was true.

So as the pain wrenched its way up her legs and into her chest

Charlotte clutched her husband's

hands and pushed, one last time.

There was a shout from the end of the bed. "I've got him!" Dr. Seedland said hoarsely. And a

second later there was a fierce, thin wail.

In the room across the hall, Sophie and Patrick had given up. They were curled up in the huge

armchair like a pair of hibernating animals, taking pure animal comfort from each other's

nearness. For a while they listened carefully, but when Alex shouted "No, no!" Sophie slumped

back against Patrick. She was too tired even to cry anymore. Patrick was stricken with grief for

his twin. In the back of his mind, he knew that Alex would never get over this, never. He loved

Charlotte; he had failed her; she had died. Mentally, Patrick sat in the chair gathering his strength

to fight for his twin's life.

But then a baby's tiny wail pierced their silent thoughts. Patrick literally leaped from the chair

and Sophie was launched into the air and flew down to the ground: whack! She fell on her left

shoulder.

Sophie screamed with pain, and Patrick instantly scooped her up into his arms. They poised

there,

absolutely silent, until another spiraling wail hit the air. An uneasy thought occurred to Patrick.

Had the doctor "rescued" the baby? Or did Alex succeed in waking up Charlotte? He had told his

twin to wake her up, but he had almost no hope that it was possible. Patrick set Sophie on her

feet and opened the door into the hallway.

The door to the bedroom was open. Sophie's heart quailed; the bed was absolutely soaked in

blood. But then . . . there was Alex, striding toward them, a huge grin splitting his face. And in

his arms was a tiny, tiny little scrap of humanity.

"See?" Alex held back the flap of the white blanket so they could see a red face and small mouth,

opening and shutting.

"He's hungry," Sophie said, fascinated. "Or, she's hungry?" "She," Alex said. He looked about.

Charlotte's carefully chosen wet nurse had gone off to the kitchens long ago, and was at that

moment drowning her sorrows in a tankard of ale. Mall, who had stood by Charlotte's bed for

hours, was weeping, head down on the kitchen table.

Alex looked down at his daughter's small mouth and walked back to the bed. Charlotte was

propped up against the bed board, still ashen white, but without the faraway, lost look she had

before. She seemed to be asleep. The doctor had pulled a sheet up around her after the delivery.

Alex pulled it down to Charlotte's waist and carefully settled his little daughter against her breast.

Charlotte opened her eyes, startled, as a tiny flailing fist hit her.

"Ohhhh," she breathed. The baby opened its black eyes and stared at her; then she turned her

head restlessly and opened her little mouth again. Instinctively Charlotte brought her up to her

breast and the baby closed her small lips around her nipple.

Charlotte's eyes met Alex's and her free hand clasped his. Alex cupped his large hand around his

daughter's tiny head.

"She's beautiful," Alex said. "Look! She's sucking."

Suddenly the midwife, the wet nurse, and Mall erupted back into the room.

"I'll take the little babe," the wet nurse said importantly. She had been living at the manor for two days, waiting for the baby to come.

"No!" Charlotte said, as the wet nurse reached down to take the baby. "Alex!" Alex felt a swell of pride. Charlotte had looked to him to save her baby; she obviously didn't still think of him as a kidnapper. He grinned at the wet nurse.

"The countess has decided to nurse the child herself," he explained cheerfully.

"My lady!" The wet nurse was aghast. Ladies never, never nursed their children. She bent down

next to the bed. "My lady, your breasts . . . they will never be the same."

Charlotte looked at her uncomprehendingly. She felt as if she were half-asleep, and sounds only

reached her through a thick cotton blanket. She looked away from the woman and down at the

baby's tiny bald head. It was so fragile. Charlotte caressed the baby's head tentatively, running her

fingers delicately over her rosy shell-like ears. When the woman kept saying something to her,

she looked up at Alex in silent appeal. Alex took the wet nurse by the arm and led her out of the

room, passing her over to the housekeeper with a muttered remark about compensation. Slowly

the room emptied.

To his surprise, Alex realized that he knew Charlotte's housekeeper. The woman in front of him,

who was obviously the housekeeper given her ring of keys, was the young girl Charlotte had been

painting in London. Although she didn't seem so young now. At her direction he went back to the

bed and bent down.

"Darling, I'm going to carry you into another room now." Charlotte smiled exhaustedly, a flicker

of a smile. Alex's strong arms came under her and she gratefully laid her head against his

shoulder. In her arms nestled their little baby, still suckling irregularly, although her eyes weren't

open anymore.

Alex laid his wife and child tenderly in the room Mall pointed out. When Charlotte's maid

appeared with a bowl of water, he waved her away and washed Charlotte's body himself. She

hardly seemed to notice as the warm sponge glided over her body. The baby was asleep now, its

cheek tucked against Charlotte's breast.

Finally Alex snuffed out most of the candles and climbed on the bed too. He couldn't bear to be

parted from them. In a gesture that broke his heart, Charlotte handed him their daughter,

adjusting the babe's little head against his arm. Then she snuggled against his side and fell

instantly into a deep sleep. Alex lay awake a long time, staring blindly at the opposite wall.

An hour or so later Pippa trundled into the room in her nightclothes, shrieking with delight to see

her papa. Charlotte didn't even stir.

Alex showed Pippa the new baby, but she showed almost no interest. Instead she said, "Mama!"

and crawled over Charlotte's body so that she could nestle on her other side. She butted her head

up against Charlotte's shoulder, clutched a bit of Charlotte's

nightgown, and closed her eyes,
absolutely blissful.

Alex nodded to Pippa's nanny, who left. Then he leaned back
against the headboard, sick with

self-loathing. How could he have thought to separate this family?
If Charlotte is generous enough

to give me a place in the family again, he vowed with all the
silent strength of his soul, I will

guard it with my life and never, never be the one to pull it to
pieces.

Alex lay unmoving in the huge bed until dawn began to creep
through the curtains, rearranging

the puzzle pieces of life: the garden girl and how she led him to
marry Maria, and Maria's wild

sexual gyrations, and how they had nothing to do with Charlotte.
And perhaps, most important,

his own destructive rage at Maria, which he unfairly directed at
Charlotte.

As his new little daughter sighed and stirred and opened her
black eyes, peering about in a dazed,

half-blind sort of way, Alex remembered the anguish in Maria's
eyes as she'd begged him to be

kind to Pippa, and to love her. Whatever Maria had been, she
was a good mother, Alex thought.

Healing remembrance flooded his soul: He, after all, was alive.
He didn't have to say good-bye to

Pippa, or to Charlotte, or to this little scrap of humanity in his
arms. Alex shuddered inwardly.

But he smiled too. The burning, corrosive rage was gone. When
he thought of Maria now, he

knew he would remember the dying mother, tears streaming
down her face, telling him in a

broken voice that she hadn't allowed Pippa into the room for
three weeks so that their daughter

wouldn't catch scarlet fever.

Alex's new child opened her delicate red mouth and cried the desolate, high wail of a hungry

newborn. Charlotte's eyes snapped open and she sat up, bewildered. Then she held out her arms,

smiling as Alex gently arranged their daughter's round head against Charlotte's breast. And when

Alex's eyes met the forgiving eyes of his wife over the head of a noisily sucking infant, there was

no man in all of England who could claim to be happier than he.

For the first few weeks, as Charlotte's body mended, she pored over her baby, learning every

little bump and curve, the enchanting dip of her eyebrows, the sturdiness of her body, the

wildness of her hungry eyes, the bliss of the little grunts she made while eating.

When she thought about Alex at all, it was with gratitude: He got up in the dark and went to the

door in answer to Katy's soft knock, bringing Sarah for a feeding. He played with Pippa in the

afternoons. Alex and Charlotte curled together like spoons at night, at least the part of the night

during which she wasn't nursing Sarah. And after the first few weeks, Sarah only roused once a

night for a feeding. Charlotte would wake up, wondering where Sarah was, and find a warm,

masculine arm curled around her stomach, or a muscled leg carelessly thrown across her own. It

made her heart glow.

Sarah was a very even-tempered baby, easy to care for and undemanding. Charlotte soon began

to feel like herself again. One morning when Sarah was around two months old, Charlotte was

woken by the faint jiggle as her husband swung his legs out of bed.

Marie had been in the room early in the morning and had drawn the curtains. Morning sun

puddled on the carpet and lit up the glinting silver in Alex's hair. He was standing stark naked by

the window, staring down at the gardens. Charlotte sleepily allowed her eyes to drift up his long,

muscular legs and the line of his back, all the way to his towering shoulders. Alex's hair had

grown longer during the past two months; curls touched the back of his neck.

"Alex," Charlotte said, before she thought.

Alex turned around at the soft sound of her voice as if he'd heard a gunshot. Charlotte was

propped up on her elbow, her velvety black hair cascading over her shoulders. She was wearing a

fine lawn nightgown with wide shoulders, suitable for nursing, and the neck had slipped down

leaving a creamy shoulder bare. Alex's body responded

immediately.

Charlotte was staring at him in fascination, not saying a word. A faint pink flush rose up her neck.

Alex walked over to the bed, consciously making himself stroll as if the center of his body wasn't jutting into the middle distance.

"Charlotte?" he asked.

Charlotte didn't say anything. She was trembling and she couldn't seem to stop staring at him.

Alex's eyes were black, so black that she couldn't see the pupils at all, and one of his eyebrows was arched. He sat on the bed when she didn't answer.

Slowly his hand reached out and stroked her neck, his fingers trailing down to the ivory mounds

peeking out from the lace surrounding her night rail. Slowly, slowly, almost holding his breath in

hopes of not startling her, Alex bent over and put his lips gently on her rosy mouth.

Instinctively Charlotte opened her lips and Alex's tongue swiftly invaded. Charlotte's arms

wrapped around Alex's neck and he lowered himself onto her. Charlotte gasped. His weight was

so delicious. She'd thought she would never feel it again, the way his hardness settled onto her

soft curves, making her feel tingling and tight at the same time.

Alex's hand swept down Charlotte's body and pulled up her gown with one swift wrench. He

wasn't going to give her a chance to remember that she hated him. They had never discussed

everything that happened before Sarah was born, but Alex knew that in the depth of Charlotte's

soul she must hate him. She was letting him stay with her while

the baby was so small . . . but

inside his wife must hate him for almost killing her and Sarah,
for mistrusting her and leaving
her.

But that realization hadn't stopped him from loving Charlotte -
and wanting her. Sarah was his

daughter; he knew that with every fiber of his being. But even if
she hadn't been, even given

Charlotte's lack of virginity, he didn't care. What he wanted was
this warm, laughing, exquisite

person to be next to him his whole life.

Alex's hand found her and Charlotte moaned, her body bucking
against his palm. Alex's mind

clouded. She was ready for him.

"Charlotte?" he whispered. "Are you sure it's all right? It's only
been a few months since Sarah

was born."

Charlotte opened her eyes and looked into Alex's eyes. Hers were
unfocused, glowing, until they

saw the concern in Alex's eyes.

His face was strained with the effort of holding himself back.

In response she opened her mouth and ran her tongue along the
line of his lips, a delicious,

teasing gesture that made a silent pronouncement. With a groan
Alex took her mouth and in the

same breath he thrust into her, a jagged moan leaping from his
throat.

When he didn't move again Charlotte nudged her hips up against
his. Her heart was racing. Her

entire being was focused on the incredible sensations radiating
from her hips. The racing heat in

her belly demanded that he respond, that he adopt the fierce
cadence she remembered in her

dreams. Why wasn't he moving? Alex stared down at his wife as Charlotte's long eyelashes

fluttered. Her eyes stared bewilderedly into his.

"I can't do it," he said brokenly. "Charlotte, please . . ."

Charlotte stared at her husband in absolute perplexity. What on earth was he asking for? She

bucked her hips gently against his, closing her eyes a minute, coaxing him to leap into

movement. But Alex remained still, so she opened her eyes again.

He was looking down at her silently, eyes strained and vulnerable.

"Alex?" she asked hesitatingly. "What is it? Doesn't it ... don't you want to?" "Oh, God." Alex

groaned. "Can't you feel me? Don't I want to!" He pulled back and thrust into her again, just to

show her how much he wanted to be where he was. Irresistibly he did it again. But just as a

broken moan drifted from Charlotte's lips, he stopped again.

"Alex?" To her horror, Charlotte saw that his eyes were bright with tears. "Alex!" Abruptly Alex

withdrew, pulling away and swinging his legs over the side of the bed - as if he were leaving,

Charlotte thought with alarm. She reached out and touched his elbow.

"Alex?" Sitting on the edge of the bed, Alex dropped his head into his hands.

"Alex, what's the matter?" Charlotte hastily pulled her nightgown past her hips again. Then she

sat next to her husband.

He lifted his head to look at her, eyes bright with self-condemnation. "I almost took your life and

Sarah's, Charlotte. I can't make love to you as if that didn't happen. I shouldn't be here with you;

you should have tossed me out the door long ago. God knows, Charlotte, I deserve it."

Charlotte bit back a smile. Lord, but she had married a man of extremes. When Alex first pulled

away, she felt a pulse of alarm, thinking he was going to erupt in a fury. Although, now that she

knew with utter certainty how much he loved her, even a jealous rage couldn't really disturb her

happiness.

"Do you love me?" Alex leaned forward and just touched her lips with his. "You know that I do,"

he said hoarsely.

"Do you think I love you?" A wry smile lit Alex's eyes. "In my more optimistic moments."

"Don't you see, Alex?" Charlotte reached out and cupped his face in her two hands, her grasp

both sensual and confiding. "Don't you see how lucky we are? You loved me so much that you

were able to save my life - you pulled me back from the edge of death.

And I loved you enough that I followed your voice back, even though I had given up."

Charlotte leaned forward and caressed Alex's mouth with her lips, sweetly, with all the truth that

lay in her eyes. Then she whispered: "To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, till death do

us part."

Silently Alex pulled his wife into his arms, burying his face in her sweet-smelling curls. The

silky roughness against his cheek soothed the tightness in his throat, the burning in his eyes.

"I don't deserve your love, Charlotte. I'm a jealous idiot," he said. "I couldn't stand the idea of

anyone else touching you - and the thought made me irrational. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I was

cruel." Tortured guilt strained Alex's voice.

Charlotte rubbed her cheek against Alex's shoulder comfortingly. "You are an idiot, Alex," she

said. "Why would I ever want any other man to touch me when we make love the way we do?"

But still Alex held back. "You don't know how stupid I was, Charlotte. I kept praising myself

because I was going to forgive you, but you have to forgive me. If ... if I promise not to go insane

again, will you ever trust me?" "I trust you," Charlotte said simply. "In all ways: in bed and out of

bed."

"I couldn't ever sleep with another woman," Alex answered, speaking to the question of beds.

"Well," Charlotte said with a lopsided, teasing smile, kissing the honey dark skin of Alex's

shoulder, "can you imagine sleeping with me" She trailed small, heated kisses along the ridge of

Alex's collarbone and up his neck to his beating pulse. Then she stopped, throwing back her head

and looking straight into her husband's coal-black eyes.

"I love you, Alexander Fakes. I love you so much that I will undoubtedly forgive you again and

again and again, for anything you do."

Alex's eyes burned down into hers. "You couldn't love me as much as I love you."

The words hung in the air between them. Now Charlotte's eyes were dewy. Alex lowered his

head, passionately kissing her eyes, her cheeks, the whirl of her ears. As each tear slowly slid

down her creamy skin he kissed it off. Finally they fell back onto

the bed together.

Charlotte's hands clutched Alex's shoulders as he sunk into her warm depths.

"We're together," Alex said.

"Together." In Charlotte's voice was a promise.

"With my body," Alex said hoarsely, looking straight into Charlotte's eyes. "With my body I thee

worship." In his voice there was a promise - a promise, a vow, a benediction.

Postscript August 1803 A lex rode through the warm autumn twilight with Lucien Boch and I -

Will Holland, all three men silently enjoying being outdoors at the very moment when the sun

began to wink under the edge of the heavy woods surrounding Baron Holland's country estate.

Their horses pranced, sensing that they were finally heading home after a long day.

"This is a lovely spot you have, Will."

Will smiled and then checked his horse as they approached the gatehouse. "Excuse me a minute,

won't you? My gatekeeper's wife has been ill and I'd like to enquire about her." Will jumped off

his horse and disappeared into the thatched cottage.

Lucien pulled his horse up and turned to face Alex. "You have never let me thank you properly,"

he said, his voice lilting slightly with a French intonation.

"There's nothing to thank me for," Alex replied.

"Yes, there is," Lucien insisted. "I know, of course, of the scandal that your wife had to suffer in

our absence. Had I not asked you, you never would have left her, especially at such a delicate

time. If only you had told me she was pregnant!" "We didn't know," Alex said lightly.

"Besides - it has resolved itself. Charlotte put up with a little gossip, but it's all settled down

now; no one would dare to suggest that Sarah was not my child." She was his to every curve of

her face and twitch of her baby eyebrows.

"Yes, but I am very regretful that - " "Lucien. It was nothing."

Will emerged from the gatehouse and swung back up on his mount, ending their conversation.

Alex nudged his horse to a gallop, eager to return to the house. He had been gone for hours,

looking over the grounds and being shown Will's new mills. He missed the children . . . and

Charlotte.

Lucien caught up with Alex again. "I understand it is your birthday," he said slyly. "I believe

there is a surprise in store for you."

Alex shot him a sideways glance. "The devil you say."

Lucien gave him a secret smile. "So I believe."

But there was nothing surprising about the fact that Pippa dashed toward him across the velvet

lawn before Will's manse. Well, perhaps it was an exaggeration to say that Pippa dashed - she

trotted toward him, shouting "Papa! Papa!" in a piping voice. Alex jumped off his horse and

swung his daughter up on his shoulder where she whispered blackberry-flavored secrets in his ear

about the kittens in the barn and the berries that grew in the kitchen gardens.

And there was nothing surprising about the fact that his wife's eyes met his with such a stir of

love and desire that Alex found himself barely under control, and right there in the drawing room

had to stroll over and examine Chloe Holland's china cabinet - as

if he were a teenager again!

His wife's gurgle of laughter was nothing new either, even if it did make him long to toss her

over his shoulder and head for the bedroom.

Dinner passed without incident. Chloe presided over the meal with an engaging lack of

formality - she had taken to her role as Baroness Holland with effortless ease. The party talked of

the possibility of a Napoleonic invasion and of the unsavory death of Bishop Burnham (in the

arms of a woman with a dubious reputation). No one mentioned Alex's birthday at all. Alex

almost felt piqued. But then . . . perhaps Charlotte was planning a special treat for him in their

bedroom. His wife, tied in a large bow. He rather liked the sound of that. The ladies rose and

retired to the drawing room; Alex, Will, and Lucien settled in the library with tumblers of scotch.

The door to the library swung open to reveal Will's butler. He was French and professed to speak

no English.

"My lord," said the butler. Alex looked up enquiringly. The butler held a white card in his gloved

hand. He bowed magnificently and handed it to Alex.

Alex glanced over at Lucien and saw his secret smile break out again.

"My birthday?" "Quite so," his friend replied.

Alex broke the seal and read the note rapidly. Then he crooked an eyebrow at Lucien.

"I am instructed to proceed upstairs and dress appropriately."

"Then by all means, Alex, do not let us keep you." Will jumped up, a conspiratorial grin covering

his face.

"Does everyone know what my wife is planning?" Looking at his two friends, their eyes lit with

mischievous laughter, Alex knew the answer to his question. He ran quickly up the marble stairs,

his mind racing to elaborate pictures of what "appropriate" dress might be. What would Charlotte

be wearing, for example? But the master bedroom held no one but Keating - no dressed, or

deliciously undressed, wife.

Keating had laid out formal dress on the bed. Alex's protest died on his lips. Obviously this was a

surprise that Charlotte had elaborately planned. It would be churlish of him to refuse to comply.

Still, he knit his brow when Keating swirled his old green domino around his shoulders.

"Am I going to a masquerade? In this godforsaken part of the country?" "I couldn't say, my lord. I

am merely following the countess's orders." Keating didn't mention that Charlotte had asked him

to take Alex's green domino out of the attic some two months ago, and that the birthday

excursion had been in the planning stages somewhat longer than that.

Finally Keating ushered his perplexed master out of the bedroom. Will's butler was waiting in the

hall, a devilish French smile on his face, Alex thought rather crossly. The butler majestically led

the way to a carriage outside.

Finally, Alex thought, quickening his pace. He climbed inside, brushing off the footman's

extended arm.

But the carriage was empty, and before he could register the fact, the door was flung shut behind

him and the horses picked up.

"For Christ's sake," Alex said blankly, to himself.

They didn't go far: perhaps twenty minutes. Alex helped himself to a basket placed on the

backseat, clearly for his pleasure. But even a glass of excellent champagne didn't soothe his

feelings. Where was his wife? What was the delight of drinking champagne alone? His eyes grew

dark as he imagined her sitting opposite him in the carriage. Then he smiled wolfishly. He'd have

his revenge for this lonely birthday party! She'd have to be in the carriage on the way home, after

all. . . .

So by the time the carriage jolted to a close, Alex's mood was restored. In fact, he was feeling

quite cheerful, having finished near to the whole bottle of champagne.

He tossed open the carriage door and jumped out, only to find himself face-to-face with Keating.

A quick glance showed him that they had stopped in the manicured driveway to a country house.

"Keating!" "My lord," his valet said quiedy. He had apparently just climbed down from the

driver's seat; his cheeks and nose were bright red with cold.

"Good God, man, what are you doing here? And where are we?" Alex demanded.

Keating hesitated. In his hands he held a black piece of cloth.

"My lord, I must ask you to turn around," he replied.

Alex glanced at the cloth and then at his embarrassed valet's face. Charlotte was going a long

way with this masquerade. He shrugged and turned around, allowing his valet to fit the black

cloth snugly over his eyes.

Keating guided him back into the carriage and it jolted off, up the drive, unless Alex missed his

bet. He was starting to sour on the whole business again. If his wife wanted him blindfolded - or

tied up, for that matter - why didn't she just do it herself? Why all this rigmarole involving the

servants? The carriage stopped and Keating put a hand under his elbow. Alex shrugged it off and

stepped out of the carriage. Oddly enough, it sounded as if they had arrived at a party. He could

hear the shrill laughter of women and the chords of a small orchestra.

"My lord," Keating said softly. And this time Alex suffered him to take his elbow and steer him

up some ten steps and into what seemed to be a crowded hall.

The party-goers were intrigued by

a blindfolded man, Alex heard that. But he also heard some very surprising accents. This wasn't a

party solely attended by the gentry.

Alex was about to wrench off the blindfold and demand an explanation when Keating stopped

him, saying, "Beware, my lord. You are at the top of a flight of stairs."

Then he felt the tie of the blindfold ease and the cloth fell away.

Alex stood at the top of a flight of marble stairs, looking down into a very crowded ballroom. He

scanned the room in surprise. The ballroom was hot, and the heat was exacerbated by the

aggressive smell of tallow dips and overheated dancers. Long forgotten memories stirred, telling

Alex that he'd been in this room before.

On the dance floor ruffled skirts competed for space with soiled-looking Greek robes. A few

women sported small masks, but lavish makeup seemed to be a more common disguise. Alex

frowned. Where on earth was he? The French windows were hung with shabby maroon velvet. .

. .

Of course! This was Stuart Hall - and - and this must be the Hookers' Ball. The Saturday

Hookers' Ball. It was a Saturday, Alex thought numbly.

His eyes rose, and stopped. There she was. Next to a statue of Narcissus was a slender woman

dressed in a black domino, powdered hair piled high. With a sense of leaden inevitability Alex

skirted the exuberant revelers on the steps and walked down into the ballroom. He walked

through the crowds of dancing party-goers, his green domino

brushing against the powdered

shoulders and garish frills of ladies of the night. But he didn't look either to the left or the right.

He didn't want to break eye contact with his wife.

For her part, Charlotte felt as if she had been waiting her whole life for this moment. There was

her beloved, beloved footman at the top of the stairs, in his green domino with his silver-shot

hair. But he looked for her this time. And when Alex's eyes met hers, a message of such tender

passion passed between them that she shivered and had to hang on to Narcissus's cool stone arm

in order to catch her balance.

Then her shiver turned into a grin. Alex was striding through the ballroom as if the hookers,

servants, merchants, and the rest didn't exist. No one, watching his combination of unconscious

arrogance and effortless grace, could reasonably think him a footman.

Even in a cloak some ten years old he was clothed in the nameless confidence of high blood

matched by high intelligence. Finally, after an eternity, he stood before her.

Her hair was powdered. Her skin was so white that her hair had to be red. She was wearing a

black domino, and sheltering herself in the shadow of a statue. She was herself . . . she was his

garden girl . . . she was Charlotte.

Without missing a beat, Alex wrapped his wife in his green domino and kissed her so

possessively, so lovingly, and so passionately that Charlotte's knees gave way and she had to

cling to him for balance. She slid her hands inside his formal

black coat, hands drifting over the

faintly rough texture of his fine lawn shirt, over the muscled expanse of his back.

Alex looked down at her from underneath his black eyelashes. "I should kill you for this trick,"

he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Or I should kill myself for being such an utter,

unmitigated idiot."

Charlotte grinned up at him impudently, still leaning against his chest.

"Happy birthday, love." "Vixen," Alex growled, bending his head again.

When a patron of the ever-popular Hookers' Ball swept through the throng of revelers holding a

woman in his arms and headed up the stairs, hardly anyone in the assembly spared him a second

glance. And the fact that the man in the green domino pulled his amour into his lap the minute

they were settled in the carriage, without exchanging a word, would have been considered

unsurprising as well. It wasn't until much later that night - nearly morning, actually - that the

Earl and Countess of Sheffield and Downes had the time and breath to discuss the earl's birthday

present.

"You see," Alex said, pulling Charlotte's head against his shoulder so that he could punctuate his

words with kisses dropped into silky curls, "I put together the fact that you looked like Maria, but

I didn't want to think too much about it. The clanger was that I never thought of the fact that I

married Maria because she looked like the girl in the garden, and that meant that you looked like

her too, and . . . that meant you were the girl in the garden." He gave a wry, self-condemnatory

grimace. "I'm an idiot, darling. You've married an idiot."

Charlotte brought Alex's hand to her lips, kissing his palm. Her mouth curved against his hand in

an irrepressible grin. "Luckily, I've always been fond of fools," she said, her teasing reply half

muffled by his warm skin.

"I am an idiot, a dolt," Alex continued indomitably. "There were so many times I should have

known. Do you remember when I asked you to marry me in your mother's Chinese salon, and

afterward I touched you?" A rosy glow suffused Charlotte's face, but she nodded.

"You said thank you, afterward." Alex's voice was full of tormented self-hatred. "And I

thought - fool that I am - how surprising it was that for a moment you reminded me of my

garden girl, but I didn't think any further. Because, you see, the garden girl thanked me too, and

you were the only two women who were ever so courteous ... I deserve to be whipped," he said

savagely. "I caused you so much misery - " Charlotte broke off his speech by the simple

expedient of clamping her hand over his mouth.

"Don't!" she cried. "Don't you see . . . Don't you know how happy you make me? The only thing

that matters is that it was you ... it was you all the time. And now you know, and what does it

matter that you didn't remember immediately? You still wanted me, don't you see?" she

whispered achingly. "If you had come back and you had remembered taking my virginity, I never

would have been able to trust that you wanted me for myself. I would always wonder whether it

was your gentlemanly sense of honor. Do you know what I remember most clearly from the time

we spent in the Chinese salon?" Alex shook his head, mesmerized by her glowing eyes.

"You said . . . you said that you didn't want to continue kissing me because you would ruin me,

and you didn't want to do that. And all I could think of was thank God you didn't remember that

you had ruined me before, because it meant you wanted me now. Not just to make up for a

moment's indiscretion in a garden, but for myself."

Alex pulled her into his arms, burying his head in her neck. "You're too good for me," he said. "I

don't deserve you." There was a moment's silence between them.

"But it wouldn't have been like that if I had been less of a bumble-head and able to put things

together," Alex said more calmly. "In many ways the course of my whole life has been dictated

by that garden girl: you. Do you know that I dreamed about you for weeks afterward? You were

crying and I was trying to comfort you, or you were lying in my arms, and I was kissing you.

Either way the dreams were a torment. I forced Patrick to go back to that Hookers' Ball with me

the next week, but I couldn't find you. I went to five ton balls in the next two weeks, but I

couldn't find you there either. And then I went to Rome, and I thought I found someone who

looked like you . . . and so I married her, but she wasn't you either. And finally when I met the

daughter of a certain duke in London, even though I had no idea she was my garden girl, I wanted

nothing but her. I planned to marry you about two minutes after meeting you at the ball, you

know." He smiled down at his wife's dazed expression. "I'm afraid, my love, that you must be

my fate."

Charlotte clung to him, relishing the feeling that came from being in his arms. And now there

were no shadows between them.

"I missed you," she whispered. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too. I missed you even when I was the most furious. Do you know, I always knew

that we would be together again? Even as I raged about the house saying hideously stupid things,

I knew that no matter what you'd done I had to have you back, because you are part of my heart.

Losing you would be losing myself."

Alex's wife smiled up at him, her clear eyes shining with love. "You couldn't lose me, darling.

Next time you storm out of the house I'll follow you wherever you go."

"But don't ever leave me, Charlotte. I couldn't bear it."

"I won't."

"And I will cherish you," Alex whispered. "Until we are old and gray: past that time, for all time."

Charlotte made no answer to Alex's promise, for the promises the exchanged then were silent

ones, given in sweetness, taken in sweetness, remembered forever.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Charlotte washed at the basin in the corner, delicately touching that part of her which stung and paused in pleasure. Young women were forced to take piano and voice lessons as part of the part of his campaign to keep Renoir happy, and he knew that the underfootmen, Fred and Cecil (a Frenchman, Boch naturally had no part in government but he took a keen interest, particularly Part of her yearned to race out to his carriage. But she had an engagement with Lord Holland, and

Chapter 7 In the following week London society was treated to the delectable sight of the

"Pooh!" Sophie said. "I can't trust you for a minute! Even a fourth part of French blood would

money, no land, no part of the kingdom. She didn't pay much attention as the two elder sisters

cover every single inch of her body. He looked speculatively at the part of her arm that was

earth was he so eager to kiss her? It must be part of his courtship routine. Will felt her

Chapter 8 By the time all the carriages met at Vauxhall and the group had reassembled and found

here, and she didn't want any part of it.

her father would be the most difficult part of proposing to Charlotte Daicheston. He had dreaded

Chapter Charlotte opened her eyes some twenty minutes later. Her headache was gone and she

part and parcel of the myth of love at first sight? Why not pretend that you never met me before

again. That's twice, Alex thought. "Our own nurse couldn't tell us apart . . . she used to complain

lying back against the couch, her head thrown back, moist lips apart as his thumbs rhythmically

"Hmmm," Charlotte said. "It's not like Will to miss the prime part of the season."

seemed part of the woof and the weave of the fabric, were small emeralds. Charlotte looked

Chapter The new Countess of Sheffield and Downes; perched on the edge of a huge bed in the

But some part of her also held back. Don't do it, a small voice advised.

It will hurt; he will find
"I think someone once quoted part of this verse to me."
had wide lacy straps over her shoulders - but the unique part of the
gown was that one of the lacy
moistly and seemed to part for him. Dimly he noticed that Charlotte
seemed to be lucky enough
hips. Alex reached down and ripped her negligee apart at the neck,
grabbing her breast and
husband - some part of her mind couldn't even believe this was
happening to her - she was not
Probably the most surprising part of the last three weeks, he finally
realized, was how much he
Chapter The next two weeks were long remembered in the history of
Dunston Castle, Scotland,
She ran the laundry, linens, and weaving section of the Castle
operations, and what she didn't
London he used to wander into her studio and read a book on the days
when she didn't actually
concentrate properly with him in the room, but he consistently put
down his book and sprang on

Chapter 7

Chapter "Only the most unkind," Lady Skiffing observed, "would think
that Charlotte had

France? Deuced uncomfortable country!" "The part that really bothers
me is leaving you while

Chapter Two weeks later Taffy achieved what he felt sure was the
apex of his career. He unfurled
his morning Tatler and looked at it lovingly. He had the whole gossip
section to himself, just as

Chapter

But for the most part Alex nourished his dream of a grateful, loving
Charlotte. Charlotte was no
mountain, taking him to the sea. One part of his mind rejoiced at
being finally on his way. But

another part felt a mounting rage.
that this effervescent, lovely girl was alive was due in part to him;
from what Brigitte had told
the report was published. They were, of course, expecting this
response on our part and had
important part of himself had been discarded somewhere on the road,
back in the dusty column

Chapter By the time that Alex's horse was galloping down the straight
row of oak trees that lined

Part of her longed to throw herself against Alex's chest, to beg him to

listen, to hug him and kiss
book of love sonnets written in Portuguese - Sophie, to her mother's
great annoyance, showed

Chapter 21

that his brother not only had no part in his wife's pregnancy, he
hardly knew the woman.

Chapter 22 Charlotte's voice rose to a shriek. "No! No! No!" She
hunched over, protecting her

afternoons. Alex and Charlotte curled together like spoons at night, at
least the part of the night

"Am I going to a masquerade? In this godforsaken part of the
country?" "I couldn't say, my lord. I

I knew that no matter what you'd done I had to have you back,
because you are part of my heart.